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***A Peony* Transplanted: Pai Hsien-yung and  
the Preservation of Chinese *Kunqu***

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## **DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that this dissertation is a presentation of my own work and that it has not been submitted for any other degree or qualification. All materials obtained from other sources have been duly acknowledged.

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(Wei Zhou)

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the preservation of Chinese *kunqu*, one of China's indigenous operatic genres, in recent years with a special focus on renowned writer Pai Hsien-yung's new adaptation of classic *kunqu* play *The Peony Pavilion* (*Mudan ting*). I use this adaptation as a case study to demonstrate how the actual shape of a stage production can be determined by a producer's choice between tradition and innovation. The contention between the two variables can be identified in the hundreds of years of *kunqu* history. The introduction provides a brief overview of the ascension of *kunqu* to its dominance as a national opera between late Ming and early Qing dynasties (late sixteenth century to early nineteenth century). The first two chapters analyze the downfall of this genre and its struggle for existence and development from mid-Qing through the turbulent twentieth century with particular emphasis on exploring the interplay between tradition and innovation. The next two chapters focus entirely on Pai Hsien-yung's stage production of *Peony* and its wide distribution. The last chapter examines the latest *kunqu* production modes developed under the influence of Pai's approach. Through this detailed analysis of Pai's *kunqu* production and its impact, this research identifies one of the most prominent trends in *kunqu* preservation and development in the twenty-first century. It explores the dialectical approach adopted in this trend to handle the relationship between tradition and innovation, and the particular redefinition of audience construction.

A renewed wave of *kunqu* preservation efforts within China during the past decade created a favourable environment for Pai's productions. The success of his works has drawn new attention to the opera and eased *kunqu* crisis to a fairly large extent. The most significant contribution of Pai's works to Chinese *kunqu* discourse can be seen from the expansion of audience base, particularly among the educated youth, and the increasingly varied and creative strategies for *kunqu* production and distribution. These changes have greatly transformed the overall Chinese *kunqu* scene, and ushered in a new era when new *kunqu* stage works are made into collages of intrinsic *kunqu* aesthetics and certain traditional artistic values. Pai's ability to



negotiate a space for *kunqu* amidst fierce competition against the many different forms of modern entertainment has restored people's confidence in both *kunqu* and Chinese cultural traditions at large. Pai's experience of finding a particular balance between tradition and innovation, between art and market, has contributed critically not only to the emergence of more hybridized *kunqu* productions, but also to the preservation and development of other forms of traditional Chinese performing arts genres in the age of globalization and commercialization.

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I do apologize to all of those who have helped me in my past four years of study whom I may have omitted here. I feel deeply grateful for all those who honoured me with their precious time, insightful suggestions, and great friendship.

I reserve responsibility for all mistakes remaining in this thesis. All opinions and analysis contained in this work, unless otherwise attributed, are my own.

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## INTRODUCTION

Chinese *kunqu* was designated by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as one of the “Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity” in May 2001. It was the first traditional Chinese operatic genre to have received such recognition. This declaration has brought momentum for the preservation of this genre. A new wave of endeavours has markedly increased its global presence. Among all recent *kunqu* productions since this designation, the new adaptation of the classic *The Peony Pavilion* (*Mudan ting*) by the Taiwanese writer Pai Hsien-yung (Kenneth H. Y. Pai, 1937-), a 27-scene substantial work that lasts nine hours, has been arguably the most influential work.

In this adaptation, Pai retained the original work’s valorization of pure sentiment (*qing*), yet he added a particular definition to this much-celebrated theme in his adaptation: he dubbed his work the “young-lover’s version” (*qingchun ban*)<sup>1</sup> with which he aimed to target a particular section of the general audiences –educated young people. Within only a few years, Pai’s large-scale work grew into one of the most attended, most critiqued and most influential *kunqu* productions of the past decade. Its cross-Strait production and wide distribution through its round-the-world tour have provided us with a rare opportunity to investigate the confrontations and negotiations between dichotomies such as tradition and innovation, government and populace, elite and populist, art and commerce in the modern history of *kunqu*

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<sup>1</sup> From the outset of his production, this stage work was called “*qingchun ban*” in Chinese. This translates as “young-lovers’ version” and it is the term I apply throughout this dissertation. In marketing materials, a different term “youth-version” is also used to refer to this production, and this term appears in the thesis mostly in quotations.

development, which further reflect the impact of social and cultural environment on the development of this operatic genre and the practitioners' response to such impact.

This work carries out a detailed study of Pai's adaptation in an attempt to examine the preservation of *kunqu* when this genre is included into the international heritage discourse. Pai's work is worthy of study because of its broad influence among the audience, its new way of collaboration, and above all, the fact that it questioned the popular assumption that *kunqu* had lost its attraction for today's audiences, particularly among young people. By examining this case, we can not only understand what new direction *kunqu* preservation has followed in recent years, but also gain some insights into the positioning of traditional cultural value in the age of globalization.

By situating Pai's work in the broader historical context, we find that his adaptation is in essence one of many attempts at interpreting classic plays for the purpose of building a new audience base and seeking new development for *kunqu*. How this is accomplished is determined by the producer's personal perception of the opera's social functions and commercial value.

Through this work I aim to argue that the balance between the above-mentioned dichotomies does not exist in a fixed paradigm; instead it is in constant fluidity as has been revealed in *kunqu* history over the past centuries. This dissertation contends that Pai's work is one that combined traditional *kunqu* features with many modern, innovative measures, even though he has claimed that his work is "authentic" *kunqu*. This combination of both tradition and innovation has been seen throughout *kunqu* history, which has maintained the continuity of *kunqu* traditions to the present day. The distinction between Pai's work and those productions before



him lies in their different ways of handling the major aspects of *kunqu* stage works: stage design, singing, acting, costuming, etc.

My intention is to highlight the fact that the preservation of *kunqu* has been a task for many generations of artists and dramatists, but due to the varied social and cultural context at different times, this task has been handled differently. I hope this study will be able to shed some light on the more general issues regarding the preservation and commercialization of traditional Chinese culture and art in this new century.

### **Main research questions**

When we consider the preservation of cultural heritage, the first and foremost issue to look at would probably be what is to be preserved. It is not difficult to observe that Pai's work is a combination of tradition and innovation. This feature has caused the dispute between his supporters who define this work as "authentic" and his critics who criticise it for being "pseudo-traditional" and for violating *kunqu* conventions. With both "tradition" and "innovation" combined in this *kunqu* production under discussion, would the practice still be justified as preservation of cultural heritage? Why was it necessary to make such innovations? And why did Pai choose to keep the balance between traditions and innovations to such a particular point (i.e., reserving singing and acting conventions while making innovations in other aspects)? These are the basic issues that I wish to address in this work.

In this study, I ask the following sets of questions: firstly, during the process of production, what was Pai and his team's choice between tradition and innovation? In what ways has the socio-political and economic environment affected their choice?

And how did *kunqu* producers and actors respond to such social impact? This confrontation and compromise represents an issue similar to that experienced by traditional Chinese culture and art in the age of economic boom generated by the advent of globalization. I intend to examine these questions concerning production by contextualizing Pai's work in both a historical perspective and a global environment. Such correlation analysis is expected to provide support for my argument about the recurrent interaction models in *kunqu* development.

Secondly, concerning the marketing and reception of Pai's work, why has this production been so warmly received by young audiences across the Taiwan Strait, in the Chinese diasporas and among foreign audiences in the West? What is the cultural significance of their enthusiastic embrace of this *kunqu* work? Due to the differences of geo-political and cultural contexts, Pai's work was marked by discrete cultural connotations. To find out these connotations is of importance for us to understand *kunqu*'s social functioning in trans-national settings.

Thirdly, considering the impact of Pai's work on other *kunqu* preservation endeavours, why does this work's production and distribution mode appeal to many other *kunqu* practitioners and cultural officials alike in recent years? What inspiration did they draw from Pai's production? Does the success of their productions mean that Pai's mode has become the standard mode for *kunqu* preservation?

### **Theoretical framework**

Since *kunqu* preservation is the central topic of this study, the preservation of *kunqu* traditions and conventions is naturally one of the key points of discussion. To speak of the preservation of *kunqu* traditions, it is necessary to briefly examine how

*kunqu* traditions are defined, and whether these definitions conform to the general definition of tradition.

The definition of tradition is fluid and dynamic, largely subject to different people's interpretations and purposes. Behind the definition of tradition usually lies the choice of certain values, lifestyles, and even the appreciation of political powers. This has been repeatedly manifested by the various definitions and choices of tradition along *kunqu* history.

Handler and Linnekin (1984: 286-287) argued that tradition "is not a bounded entity made up of bounded constituent parts," instead, it is "a symbolic process"; it is "a process of interpretation, attributing meaning in the present though making reference to the past." According to this understanding, "tradition" is a designation assigned by the practitioners involved, rather than some fixed objective attributes.

In his well-known theoretical framework of "invented tradition", Eric Hobsbawm wrote: "[invented tradition] is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historical past..." He continued to explain that such continuity is largely fictitious, as they are "responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition" (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983: 1-4).

In Hobsbawm's theory, two elements are crucial for the constitution of the invented tradition: one is a particular political, cultural, or personal end that the "tradition" is meant to serve, and the other is the link between the invented tradition

and the past. Or, put it simpler, both purposes and origins are crucial to make an invented tradition meaningful and convincing. By borrowing this framework, I seek to understand not just the process how the new tradition in discussion was constructed and implemented by a small group of individuals, but also how their audiences and fellow practitioners were convinced of its legitimacy.

Firstly, it is clear that the invention of this *kunqu* tradition was deliberately planned. Pai aspired to present *kunqu* as an embodiment of Chinese cultural legacy, and to enhance Chinese cultural identity through this performing art. It is important to point out that it is the cultural meaning of *kunqu* art that lies at the core of the invention of this tradition. It disposes a symbolic function as a representation of China's refined performing art. It incorporates important cultural appeals and meets crucial emotional needs (as will be shown in Chapter 4), providing a sense of belonging and identity. As for its link to the past, the elements in Pai's stage work that he claimed to be authentic and traditional are drawn from the practice of some old masters rather than being taken from pure fabrication. With both the cultural needs and link to the past in place, this tradition was firmly established and followed by many *kunqu* practitioners. It has already begun to shape many people's understanding about what is "real" about *kunqu* art. However, it is also important to note that since changes occur in the chain of transmission of performing techniques among different generations, it is still largely problematic to say that Pai's *Peony* as a single production represents the conventions of different *kunqu* styles.

Pai's *Peony* and the ensuing stage productions that drew inspiration from it (as discussed in Chapter 5) have collectively proved that the traditional Chinese performing arts still maintain viability amidst today's ever-changing socio-cultural

environment against the onslaught of globalization. The particular production and promotion strategy adopted by Pai and his team revealed that the seemingly paradoxical dichotomy between tradition and innovation were strategically merged, and for certain reasons, this combination was accepted by many people, including cultural officials, and served the purpose of “cultural heritage preservation.” In Pai’s practice, the juxtaposition of *kunqu* conventions such as singing and acting techniques with modern stage setting and lighting designs generated the most prominent feature of his adaptation. It is important to note that this method of incorporating both traditional and modern elements into the process of new stage production was not new in modern times. *Kunqu* history has presented many examples of other such methods that aimed at a similar goal, that is, to seek continued existence and development in the midst of a changing social and cultural environment. Although Pai’s work is far from being avant-garde, the innovations made in it nevertheless have accumulated to such a level as to give the work a new flavour, even though Pai claimed it to be an “authentic” *kunqu* work. The *kunqu* conventions, which Pai took as the essence of the performance, served to build a link with the past and to justify this work as “traditional”; on the other hand, the innovations and alterations, particularly with regard to the visual aspects of the work, such as costume design, stage setting, lighting and properties, served to suit the needs of modern audiences.

Which parts of *kunqu* tradition and which parts of modernity should be taken to form the particular production that suits the need of the modern stage? Tradition provided the basis of the production, whereas innovations represented the impetus for change and renewal. The answers to this question may vary and the outcomes of

the production vary accordingly. Pai's specific choice reflects his observation and interpretation of this issue situated in the modern social context. Yet it would be more appropriate to say that this choice is made by a group of *kunqu* advocates who reached a basic agreement upon such a choice. It is interesting to observe that Pai's strategy of production and publicity, although bearing much trace of personal interest and taste, earned a lot of support from private entrepreneur sponsors, mainstream dramatists and scholars, the government and the general public. One of the reasons for this is because Pai linked the adaptation of this play with the revival of *kunqu* and the revitalization of traditional Chinese culture at large.

This represents not simply a clinging to nostalgia among a small group of elite audience members, but also a quest for the confirmation of Chinese identity and the restoration of national pride derived from this cultural heritage. Pai's *kunqu* production has involved many people from outside the *kunqu* circle, such as private sponsors, directors, advisors, and actors. This trend reveals that such a pursuit of a sense of pride and identity is not just a need of *kunqu* professionals and aficionado audiences, but of many more from the general public. This growing interest seems to have run contradictory to the outcry concerning the diminishing position of *kunqu* in recent years, however, by situating this phenomenon in its social context, we will find that it signifies a particular trend of cultural consumption by the Chinese community within the globalized world during China's economic boom.

As many scholars have argued, authenticity is never fixed or stable; instead, it is in constant flux. In the case of Pai's production, authenticity is adopted as a rhetorical strategy to highlight the marketable value of his production. This authenticity becomes desirable and valuable because of the designated position of

*kunqu* as a masterpiece of cultural heritage, which means that it has been universally acknowledged as a demonstration of the essence of traditional Chinese performing art.

The awareness of preserving *kunqu* traditions or conventions did not become apparent until *kunqu* started to decline in popularity. As will be shown in Chapters 1 and 2, the growth of alternative genre, especially Peking opera, forced *kunqu* practitioners to consider the preservation of *kunqu* traditions. The maintenance of the vestiges of *kunqu* became even more valued once the genre earned UNESCO designation as cultural heritage.

Apart from the interplay between tradition and innovation, the dichotomy between elite and populist is also presented in this work. This is also a recurrent issue during the entire course of *kunqu* history. *Kunqu* is known to be the most refined form of opera, the “opera of the elites”, largely as a result of its association with the elite class during the Ming and Qing dynasties.<sup>2</sup> Then, during the early years of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), it was reformed to suit the needs of ideological education and political propaganda for the general public, whereas its elitist feature was considered to be unwanted feudalist dross that needed to be eradicated. In the post-1976 years, although the political climate loosened, it has remained a primary goal for all socialist art and culture to serve the general public. However, Pai’s production for the first time in recent years selected a particular section of the public to be its primary target audience: educated young people. The more recent *kunqu* productions made under the influence of Pai’s *Peony* have made an even more overt attempt to attract elite audiences. Based on this, I argue that *kunqu* art possesses both

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<sup>2</sup> Grant Guangren Shen has published a book to discuss the elite class and *kunqu* in the Ming times. See Shen 2005.

elite art feature and a populist appeal among the general public. Whether it demonstrates the elite feature or populist feature is again determined by the producer's strategy.

### **Research methodology and scope**

The research in this dissertation is principally based upon the analysis of two kinds of sources: 1) first-hand materials about the production of Pai's *Peony*, including interviews, news reports and production chronicles edited by Pai and his team, and 2) academic criticisms, press reports, as well as reviews and comments from the general public on the internet. My personal attendance at the performance of this opera in London in the summer of 2008 offered me not just the opportunity to interview Pai Hsien-yung, but also to observe the reception of this work on the international stage.

My interview with Pai offered me first-hand material about the production and circulation of his *kunqu* adaptation work. This interview was closely analysed along with many other interviews by Pai that had appeared both on TV, on the internet and in the printed press. I then used my fieldwork trip to Beijing in the summer of 2008 to gather as much information about the project as possible. Most printed materials in Chinese were collected during this trip. I also had the opportunity to communicate with scholars from the China Academy of Social Sciences on the topic of Pai's adaptation.

Pai's *Peony* is examined as a case study to support my argument on the dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation, and the exploration of the



modern audience base. Each aspect of the production process and the reception of the play on its world tour is analyzed in detail so as to establish such a discourse.

My analysis of Pai's *Peony* is conducted from several perspectives. Firstly, it is situated in the historical timeline of *kunqu* development. As one of the major phenomena in the most recent phase, Pai's work conforms to a basic, recurrent rule: *kunqu* is not confined to a fixed, fossilized aesthetic system that refuses to countenance any change or alteration; instead, it is always responsive to the change of social attributes, through which it earns the opportunity to survive and develop. Such responses are always embodied in the *kunqu* practitioners' choices of what to preserve and what to change. Secondly, the rehearsals and production process of Pai's *Peony* are examined in detail in order to reveal the interaction between the specific social circumstances in this new century, i.e., the promotion of *kunqu* as intangible cultural heritage by an international organization, China's use of soft power<sup>3</sup> and its aspiration of traditional cultural revival, and the reaction of the *kunqu* artists and promoters to such circumstances in their quest for *kunqu* preservation. Thirdly, I also carefully analyse the consumption of Pai's work and its impact within the *kunqu* circle, particularly a new production trend that took shape in the past few years. If the study of this work's production reveals to us how the social context has formed Pai's strategy, this examination of its reception and subsequent influence provides us with the chance to see how this work in return has reflected the cultural needs of the various audience communities and helped form a new production mode.

It is important to point out that this is not an exhaustive study of all major developments in the area of *kunqu* preservation in recent years. Rather, it focuses on

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<sup>3</sup> A brief introduction to "soft power" and China's aspiration to increase its cultural soft power will be offered in the first section of Chapter 4.

one of the most representative modes of production and marketing, which features private entrepreneurial sponsorship and cross-Strait collaboration. Other modes of *kunqu* preservation, such as government-sponsored training and production, amateur *kunqu* society production, and even hybridized stage productions by Western directors and artists all deserve separate studies.

### **Literature review and state of research**

An overwhelming majority of *kunqu*-related scholarly publications that are available up until today are written in Chinese language. Earlier research studies observed the following major themes: historical, textual, musical, and performances. Historically oriented works and music research works account for a large proportion of these publications. The first prominent wave of *kunqu* research was seen in the early years of the Republican era when some scholars, represented by Wu Mei (1884-1939)<sup>4</sup> and Yu Pingbo (1900-1990),<sup>5</sup> saw the cultural value of this genre and advocated its preservation. Research during this period was focused on the musical style and the restoration and compilation of music notations. The next peak period of *kunqu* research was in the 1980s. Apart from the continued focus on music research, a majority of the scholarly writings dealt with historiography, bibliographical accounts of famous actors, literary examinations of play texts, and the chronicling of extant historical materials. However, it seems that how and why the genre followed its particular trajectory since its origin has not received due critical attention.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Wu Mei is one of the leading Chinese dramatists in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He is known for his life-long devotion to *kunqu* research and promotion. He is not only good at music composition and performance, but also very active in *kunqu* teaching and training in colleges, including the Chinese top university Peking University. For more information, see Zhou Bing & Jiang Wenbo 2009: 315-316.

<sup>5</sup> Yu Pingbo is a famous poet and writer in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He made a great contribution to *kunqu* preservation by establishing the Beijing *Kunqu* Research Society (*Beijing kunqu yanxi she*).

<sup>6</sup> Xie Yufeng summarized the development of *kunqu* research in the last 90 years since the fall of Qing dynasty.

During the past ten years, *kunqu* studies seem to have selected new directions for examination. Scholars have started to write about social connection in *kunqu* development, *kunqu* aesthetics and performance reviews. *Kunqu* research reference books have also been published. The most representative works published during the last decade are the ten-volume “*kunqu* and traditional culture series” (*kunqu yu chuantong wenhua yanjiu congshu*) that offer valuable historical accounts of *kunqu* and its relationship with Chinese culture and society throughout its history. For example, Wu Xinlei presented a review of *kunqu* research activities from the late Ming dynasty through to the late twentieth century. Wang Ankui and He Yuren summarized the *kunqu* creative activities and theories that include both literary and stage creation. Other works from this series dealt with *kunqu*’s social functions throughout its history by relating its development with a certain socio-cultural perspectives, such as the literati class, courtesans, its place of origin in the Suzhou region, and folk costumes.

Some dramatists have conducted contextualized studies of *kunqu* history: for example, Zhou Qin (2004) examined the history of Suzhou *kunqu* revealing the mutual impact between socio-political life in historical Suzhou and *kunqu* development; Zhu Lin (2007) discussed the relationship between social life in the Jiangnan region (south of the Yangtze River) and *kunqu*, which is another example to reveal the importance of the social environment for the development of an operatic genre and its impact on society. Yu Dan (2007) summarized the most prominent aesthetic features of *kunqu*, producing a guide book for many audience members who were newly interested in *kunqu*.<sup>7</sup>

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See Xie Yufeng 2005: 134-139. For *kunqu* research in the last 30 years, see Wu Xinlei 2009: 1-16.

<sup>7</sup> This book is an edited TV talk series on the appreciation of *kunqu* classic performances.

Among *kunqu* reference books, the most comprehensive publication is Wu Xinlei's thousand-page *kunqu* dictionary published in 2002, which offers encyclopaedic information on *kunqu* history, styles, classical plays, professional troupes, amateur societies, best performers, musical features, stage conventions, a reference book list and relevant glossary. Hong Weizhu from Taiwan also edited a *kunqu* dictionary that was published in the same year, 2002.

There have been few devoted studies on *kunqu* in English. In both William Dolby (1976)'s and Colin Mackerras (1990)'s historical accounts of traditional Chinese operas, *kunqu* is dealt with briefly as a local genre. In another volume by Mackerras (1972) that focuses on the rise of Peking opera, *kunqu* is discussed as part of the broader contextual information. Perhaps Catherine Swatek (2002)'s *Peony Pavilion Onstage: Four Centuries in the Career of a Chinese Drama* can be counted as the first English publication devoted exclusively to *kunqu*. It is a work that focuses on the many adaptations of this classic play, both in text and on stage, during its four hundred years history.

## Terminology

Before the establishment of several key terms in this dissertation, a brief introduction to the origin of *kunqu* would be of help to offer a proper context.

The origin of *kunqu* was closely linked to "southern play" (*nanxi*)<sup>8</sup> that originated in the Yuan dynasty (1234-1368). Until the middle of the Ming dynasty (1369-1644), *nanxi* still had no fixed musical system. Instead, it was set up for several major music styles popular among the local audiences, among which

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<sup>8</sup> *Nanxi* took its root in Yongjia (today's Wenzhou, Zhejiang province) and developed into a major music style in the South of the country as a counterpart of Yuan *zaju* in the North. For a historical account of this music style, see Zhu Hengfu 2003: 28-34.

Kunshan music (*kunshan qiang*, sometimes called *kunqiang*) was one. Within a few decades, kunshan music evolved into the most popular opera throughout the country, and this process was marked by two major steps: the first being the reform of the music style, and the second the application of this music style to theatrical performances.

Wei Liangfu (c.1501-c.1584),<sup>9</sup> a singing master of the sixteenth century, reformed kunshan music systematically by incorporating some elements of northern music with the help of Zhang Yetang, a master of northern music. With this reform, kunshan music took a different form, and acquired such a smooth, harmonious and flowing quality called “water-polished tune” (*shuimo diao*).<sup>10</sup> Even today, kunshan music is still recognized as the most refined music style among all traditional Chinese operatic genres.

Apart from establishing a reworked melodic system, Wei Liangfu also reformed the orchestration of kunshan music. He blended transverse bamboo flute (*di*), vertical bamboo flute (*xiao*), traditional Chinese mouth organ (*sheng*), and four-stringed pear-shaped lute (*pipa*) into its basic ensemble. All these string and wind instruments greatly enriched the previous percussion-dominated accompaniment.<sup>11</sup> With the popularity of this reformed music style, Wei established his authority among singers and actors in the south, and enjoyed a great reputation among audiences.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Due to his great contribution to the establishment of *kunqu* in its early history, Wei Liangfu was widely reputed as “the sage of theatrical music” (*qusheng*). See Song Bo 2005: 19.

<sup>10</sup> In fact, the codification and reform of kunshan music style should also be attributed to other music masters and literary men, all of whom were contemporary of Wei. See Hu Ji 1989: 49-62.

<sup>11</sup> For a detailed introduction to Wei’s orchestration reform, see Zhu Hengfu 2003: 60-61.

<sup>12</sup> For an introduction to Wei’s music reform, see also Zhou Yude 2005: 73-77; Zhou Qin 2004: 36-67; *Zhongguo de kunqu yishu* 2005: 13-17.

Yet it was through the efforts of Ming scholar Liang Chenyu (c.1520-c.1591) that kunshan music was finally incorporated into theatrical performances, and then quickly established as the dominant music style in this field. Liang is best known for his *chuanqi* play<sup>13</sup> work *Washing Silk* (*Huansha ji*). This play is believed to be the first *chuanqi* work composed for the kunshan music that proved to be a feasible and suitable musical style for theatrical performances. This play became an instant hit among audiences, and as a result, kunshan music (or, *kunqu*, as it was also called so) quickly spread to different parts of the country.<sup>14</sup> Its popularity had a great impact on trends in entertainment and literary creation at the time: the literati and wealthy families considered the maintenance of a private theatre troupe to be the height of fashion, and a great number of *chuanqi* plays were written, many of which in turn contributed to the rise of *kunqu* during this period of time.

The political crisis and social unrest which engulfed China at the end of the Ming dynasty greatly hampered *kunqu* development. Its performances were markedly diminished. It was not until early Qing times when social stability had been restored that *kunqu* rose became prominent on the national theatrical stage.

“*Kunqu*” is the operatic genre under discussion in this study. It is important to make clarifications concerning the denomination of “*kunqu*”. Several terms have been used for this genre: *kunshan qiang* (the tune of kunshan area), *kundiao* (the kun tune), *shuimo diao* (the ‘water-polished’ tune), *kunqu* (the kun music), and *kunju* (the kun theatre). Among them, the last two are the most frequently used. I choose *kunqu* over *kunju* for the following reasons: firstly, this term has a longer history than *kunju*

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<sup>13</sup> *Chuanqi* is the dominant form of play works in the Ming dynasty. In most cases, this term refers to the literary work of such plays rather than their performance adaptations.

<sup>14</sup> For more details on Liang and his *Washing Silk*, see Grant Shen 2005: 9-10; Zhou Bing & Jiang Wenbo 2009: 293-294.

and reflects the music reform of this genre at the early stage in its history; secondly, although *kunqu* literally means “the kun music”, it has been widely accepted to encompass all aspects of the theatrical performances of this genre: its music, acting, stage setting, props, and so on. Besides, in the UNESCO designation, it was *kunqu* that was used for this official declaration.<sup>15</sup>

In English studies of traditional Chinese operatic genres, several terms have been widely used to refer to traditional Chinese opera: opera, drama, theatre and play. Academics of different disciplines tend to select the term that emphasizes their own particular field. “Opera” puts stress on the musical features; “drama” emphasizes the literary content; “theatre” highlights the interactions of stage setting, performances and literary content; and “play” is used to refer to a particular production, either written work or stage work.<sup>16</sup> It is important to note that music is of paramount importance to distinguish each traditional Chinese operatic genre from one another.

In this dissertation, I simply use the Romanized term “*kunqu*” to refer to the genre under discussion and do not add any one of the above-mentioned English words. Again this is because “*qu*” in *kunqu* is sufficient to emphasize the musical elements of the genre: the traditional kunshan music style in its singing and ensemble accompaniment. As for Peking opera, I choose this denomination over the Romanized term *jingju* simply because it is an established English term with which most non-specialist readers are familiar.<sup>17</sup>

Then, the definition of “intangible cultural heritage” should also be made clear before we start the discussion of *kunqu* preservation. UNESCO’s General

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<sup>15</sup> Song Bo has examined the evolution of the term *kunqu* and discussed the distinction between *kunqu* and other terms mentioned here, particularly *kunju*. He argues that *kunqu* is the proper name to highlight the artistic root of this genre. See Song Bo 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Stock offers a brief discussion on the distinction among these terms. See Stock 2003: 4-7.

<sup>17</sup> Joshua Goldstein has discussed in detail about the formation of the denomination of Peking opera. See Goldstein 2007: 10-13.

Conference adopted the International Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in October 2003 that provided guidance for heritage preservation. In this Convention, the “intangible cultural heritage” was defined as:

“the practice, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.”<sup>18</sup>

Obviously, the constant change and renewal of the heritage is considered a key attribute, and this fluidity creates a space for change and innovation.

## Chapter outline

The opening chapter of this dissertation provides a brief account of *kunqu* history between the middle of the Qing dynasty and the end of the Republican era, during which *kunqu* experienced a dramatic decline and eventually reached the brink of extinction. The waning of the Qing court’s patronage and the official banning of private *kunqu* troupes maintained by the elite class brought *kunqu*’s national standing to an end, but at the same time, this change of situation contributed to the growth of professional troupes and the reform of its performance mode marked by the maturation of excerpted-scene (*zhezi xi*) performances. During this period, although the *kunqu* music style that had been fully established in the late Ming period was basically preserved, the genre’s performing styles and role-type categorization both underwent profound evolution as a result of the changes in the social and cultural context.

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<sup>18</sup> See “Convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage”, 17 October 2003, at <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001325/132540e.pdf>, accessed on 05 May 2011.



Chapter 2 deals with *kunqu* history in the second half of the twentieth century. During the first fifteen years or so in this period after the founding of PRC, the constant changes in the country's political climate played a decisive role in forming the trajectory of *kunqu* development. Together with other traditional operas, *kunqu* was utilized by the government as a tool for ideological education and political mobilization. It was totally banned from the theatre stage for ten years during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), when the revolutionary model plays (*geming yangbanxi*) were the only sanctioned stage works throughout the country. In the post-1976 era, China's economic reform and globalization posed new threats to *kunqu* development, which reflected a common problem faced by all traditional culture and art within China. *Kunqu* artists sought to keep a balance between preserving *kunqu* conventions and making innovations to save the genre from further attrition. In contrast, the government adopted a progressive approach to support the preservation of *kunqu*.

By employing surviving primary and secondary source materials, Chapters 1 and 2 are basically historical in orientation. However, I make no attempt to proffer a complete historiography of *kunqu* development between the mid-Qing and the end of the twentieth century. Instead, by following a broadly chronological order, I choose to emphasize some major phenomena that are relevant to my discussion on the interplay between conservation of *kunqu* conventions and the introduction of innovations which aimed to suit new environments of different eras. The purpose of doing so is to provide the historical context for my discussion in the subsequent chapters, and meanwhile to demonstrate that the preservation and development of *kunqu* has been in fact a continuing process since its origin, and what is happening

today is only one part of its history. The negotiation and compromise between tradition and innovation is a recurrent phenomenon throughout these past centuries.

With the historical background provided, the next three chapters concentrate on the preservation of *kunqu* since the 2001 UNESCO designation, with a special focus on Pai Hsien-yung's new adaptation of *The Peony Pavilion*. Chapter 3 thoroughly analyzes the production of this work. The chapter starts with an examination on the cultural significance of the work's "youth-theme" that is reflected by the exploration of the romantic love between the protagonists, the use of young actors and the targeting of young audiences. The discussion then switches to the selection and training of the young cast members, an important aspect of the work's conservation of *kunqu* tradition. This is followed by a detailed analysis of the production process that includes stage setting, costume design, acting and singing, music, among other features. This discussion allows us to see why Pai and his production team have decided to preserve the singing and stylized performing conventions while making changes and innovations in the stage setting, lighting, costuming, and orchestration.

Chapter 4 focuses on this reception of Pai's stage work by analyzing its world tour since its Taipei debut in 2004. The discussion is divided into several sections, each of which deals with a geographic region: mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, the U.S., and Europe. The play's campus tours are dealt with in a separate section because these performances have formed the most important part of the play's entire world tour. This particular examination allows us to observe how the young audiences – the key target audiences of Pai's project – responded to this work. Although the press reviews and public reception of Pai's *Peony* all seem fairly

positive throughout its world tour, the perceptions of different audiences from different regions do vary. Discussion with such a division in mind helps to identify the roles that *kunqu* as a traditional performing art and cultural heritage is playing among today's Chinese communities from around the globe. This in turn sheds lights upon the preservation of traditional culture in a cross-border setting in the age of globalization.

Having dealt with the production and circulation of Pai's *Peony*, Chapter 5 widens the discussion onto a broader range, and examines the influence of this work within the entire *kunqu* circle, especially its influence on the formation of a particular trend of stage production in the past two to three years, a trend that features funding by entrepreneurs, the targeting of elite class audiences, and links with the discourse of traditional cultural revival. This chapter is divided into five sections, each one discussing a particular stage production practice. In order to fit this chapter into the overall theme of this dissertation, the discussion of each case is focused on the interplay between tradition and innovation in an attempt to reveal how the particular social and cultural environment of the production as well as the choices made by the producers in response to such an environment are capable of determining the actual outcome of the production.

## CHAPTER ONE From National Prominence to the Brink of

### Extinction: *Kunqu* between mid-Qing and the Republican Era

In his famous work on Chinese drama of the late imperial period, Japanese sinologist Aoki Masaru divided the development of *kunqu* in the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) into two broad periods: the “waning of *kunqu*” from the middle years of the Kangxi era (1662-1722) to the end of the Qianlong era (1735-1796), and “the period of decline and fall” from the Jiaqing era (1796-1820) to the end of the Qing (Mackerras 1983: 92-93). Although this time frame has been widely accepted by drama historians, some Chinese critics looked at this period from a slightly different angle asserting that the prosperity of *kunqu* was sustained well into its last age of glory during the Qianlong years, which was particularly apparent in a nation-wide craze that developed under the influence of court entertainment fashion.<sup>19</sup> While it is true that during this period many new regional operatic forms emerged as potential rivals to *kunqu*, and that the number of privately owned *kunqu* troupes decreased dramatically due to the Qing official bans, we shall not neglect the fact that it was during this same period that *kunqu* began to spread throughout the country as its primary audience shifted from the educated and ruling classes to the general public. It is also during this period that *kunqu* started to exert great influence on the development of other dramas – many of the first generation of Peking opera singers were actually from *kunqu* circle. Subsequently, excerpted-scene performances grew

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<sup>19</sup> For example, Zhou Yude defined *kunqu* in Kangxi years enjoyed “sustained popularity”, and Zhou Qin observed that *kunqu* development reached a new height during the Qianlong years. See Zhou Yude 2005: 230-273; Zhou Qin 2004: 173-183. For more detailed accounts of *kunqu* during these two eras, see Song Bo 2005: 152-214; Liu Zhen & Xie Yongjun 2005: 230-235; *Zhongguo de Kunqu yishu zu* 2005: 25-32. Wang Ankui & He Yuren 2005: 98-103; Zhu Hengfu 2003: 73-89.

into the most popular form of performing art, thus marking one of the most remarkable steps forward in *kunqu* history. Nevertheless, it is also during this period that we see the decline of the patronage of the elite class, which had functioned as one of the most important factors that had facilitated *kunqu*'s ascension to national prosperity during late Ming and early Qing times.<sup>20</sup>

From the late eighteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, Peking opera developed from a regionally popular drama into one of national importance. Its dominant position in the drama world was consolidated. It established an individual stardom system, underwent experimentation and reform, and was eventually launched as China's "national drama". It was against this backdrop of Peking opera development that *kunqu* experienced its first serious fall since its rise to prominence in the Chinese drama world. By situating *kunqu* in the social and political context of the period between the later Qianlong years (that is, towards the end of the eighteenth century) through to the Republican era (1910s-1940s), this chapter seeks to answer such questions as how *kunqu* actively sought to explore the commercial performance space after the decline of royal patronage, how its performing conventions were perfected through further reform, and what factors contributed to its survival during this age of crisis.

The first section provides a historical sketch of the waning of court patronage, which eventually resulted in the fundamental transformation of *kunqu* performances from the domestic space to the public space.<sup>21</sup> Continuing this discussion, the second section focuses on the growth of professional *kunqu* troupes and the measures taken

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<sup>20</sup> For the important contribution of the elite class to *kunqu*'s ascension in Ming times, see Zhou Yude 2005: 83-90; Song Bo 2005: 43-44; Zhu Hengfu 2003: 63-64.

<sup>21</sup> Here domestic space refers to family settings that saw performances not only by private troupe (*jiaban*) but also professional troupes (*tanghui*); public space, on the other hand, refers to the commercial performances attended by the public.

by these troupes to gain a market share amidst competition from other drama forms. Section 3 deals with the maturation of excerpted-scene performance modes, which marked the arrival of an age when actors, rather than literati playwrights, started to play a vital role in stage production, and those actors' creativity was fully reflected in the production of a number of signature scene works that would form the bulk of the *kunqu* repertoire to be inherited by generations to come. Section 4 further examines the wane of *kunqu* in the early twentieth century against the historical background of the New Cultural Movement and National Drama Movement. Special attention will be given to amateur *kunqu* societies and the only Suzhou training school to be run in the 1920s, both of which have played vital role in preserving *kunqu* conventions and sustaining its time-honoured artistic lineage.

As was mentioned in the general introduction to this dissertation, I will emphasize the untangling of the dialectical relationship between tradition and innovation which not only challenged *kunqu*'s vitality, but also its very existence in the drama world. Through our discussion, it will be shown that even when caught in such a moment of deep crisis, the artistic framework of *kunqu* never stagnated, and the operatic genre kept developing through the constant negotiation between artistic quality and social function.

### **1.1. The Waning of Royal Patronage**

The history of royal patronage of *kunqu* can be traced back to the sixteenth century when the Ming emperors followed the entertainment fashion of the elite class and started to sponsor *kunqu* performances in the imperial court (Brandon 1993: 31). The Ming tradition of valuing *kunqu* over other operatic genres was maintained by

the Qing rulers. The court patronage spanned most of the Qing years and continued throughout the entire course of the contention between the “refined” section (*yabu*, i.e., *kunqu*) and the “crude” section (*huabu*, i.e., all other local operas except *yiqiang*)<sup>22</sup> during the eighteenth and nineteenth century, although with decreasing enthusiasm. The changes in court policies on drama management since the mid-Qing reveal that the development of an operatic genre is subject to the imperial rulers’ personal preferences as well as the social reality and ideological needs of the country. This governmental interference in *kunqu* development helped to sustain its popularity during a given period of time, but in the long run, it was the public choice of Peking opera over *kunqu* that influenced the ruling class’s choice in entertainment and set the general direction of drama development.

The protection and support of the Qing court were mainly expressed through the maintenance of court troupes and the many decrees and edicts that banned other local operas. By the end of the Qianlong era, the development of many local operas started to undermine the dominance of *kunqu*. The Qing court responded quickly and issued edicts prohibiting these operas from further circulation. One such edict, issued in March of 1798, the third year of the Jiaqing reign, imposed an even stricter ban than previous documents. It read,

...drama plays passed down from Yuan and Ming dynasties were mostly sung in *kunqu* and *yiqiang* tunes... stories in these plays advocated loyalty and filial piety, which is appropriate for the general audiences and functions as a means of exhortation and admonition. Recently, however, new opera forms such as *luantan*, *bangzi*, and *qinqiang* have started to appeal to the public. Their tunes incite lewd immorality; the subject matters of these operas are either depraved and profane stories or absurd and rebellious tales. All these have a considerable impact upon social conventions and individual

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<sup>22</sup> This contention is generally known in Chinese drama history as “battle between the refined and the crude” (*hua ya zhi zheng*). The crude section is also known as *luantan*, *huatan*. This categorization was firstly made by a drama commentator Wu Changyuan from the mid-Qing, see Li Ruru 2010: 13, note 1. *Yiqiang*, also called *yiyang qiang*, is a local drama originated in Yiyang, Jiangxi province by combining melodies of *nanxi* and *zaju* of Yuan dynasty with the local music. The origin of this drama can be traced back to the end of Yuan dynasty. See Brandon 1993: 31.

conduct... As this continues to deteriorate the social ethics, the rampancy has to be halted immediately. Henceforth, only *kunqu* and *yiqiang* are allowed to be performed, while all other operas...are banned altogether.<sup>23</sup>

In the following year 1799, another similar edict was proclaimed. Thus, all dramas but *kunqu* and *yiqiang* were totally banned from stage not just in Beijing, but also in other major opera centres such as Jiangsu and Anhui provinces. As Zhu Lin (2007: 92) rightly observes, the Qing court patronage aimed at fulfilling a political goal of advocating *kunqu* as an “orthodox” opera to strengthen political control and promote social stability. It is not difficult to understand the reasons behind such a cultural policy if we take a look at the social reality during this period. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, social conflicts grew more intense and signs of crisis emerged with the White Lotus Rebellion (*bailian jiao qiyi*, 1796-1804) in central China,<sup>24</sup> then in 1814 when an armed troop formed by the “Heavenly Truth Religion” (*tianli jiao*) followers managed to break into the imperial palace in Beijing during their uprising – an event that was considered by the Jiaqing emperor to be “an unprecedented calamity to the imperial ruling”. Shaken with fear, the emperor issued a self-criticizing edict expressing his determination for introspection,<sup>25</sup> and this led to the further banning of the local operas.

Yao Shuyi (2001: 96) asserts that the Jiaqing reign marked the end of one era in Chinese opera history, that is, the dominance of *kunqu*, whereas the Daoguang era introduced a new age, that is, the rise of Peking opera. The Jiaqing emperor appears to have exhibited a rather paradoxical attitude towards both *kunqu* and other operas. Firstly, he issued imperial edicts to protect *kunqu* from confrontation with the newly

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<sup>23</sup> Cited in Wang Zhizhang 2003: 38-39. The Qianlong emperor still remained in power in the first three years during Jiaqing reign (See Wang Che 2003: 80), so some dramatists, such as Yao Shuyi, consider that this announcement reflects the Qianlong’s drama policy rather than that of Jiaqing. See Yao Shuyi 2001: 96.

<sup>24</sup> This uprising took place through Sichuan, Hubei and Shaanxi led by a religious cult named White Lotus Society as a protest of extreme living conditions.

<sup>25</sup> Cited in *Qingrenzong shilu*, vol. 274, see Zhou Yude 2005: 274-276.



developed local genres, but at the same time he dramatically reduced the size of the court *kunqu* troupe by repatriating some “civilian” (*minji*) actors to their hometowns. By the end of his reign, the total number of court performers was reduced to about 300 – less than half of that during the Qianlong years.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, Jiaqing reiterated a decree issued by Yongzheng enforcing a strict ban on the maintenance of private troupes by any officials. Commercial performances in the capital city were also prohibited. Given the fact that family troupes owned by the elite class had provided the primary space for *kunqu* development since the origin of the opera, Jiaqing’s ban of private troupes delivered a heavy blow and signalled a major change in *kunqu* performing modes.

Secondly, according to Yang Changde (1985: 92), Jiaqing was a great fan of operas. With his tolerance, the deterrent effect of those policies against the local genres was significantly reduced. Therefore, those major local operas, such as *luantan*, *qinqiang*, *bangzi* and *xiansuo*,<sup>27</sup> etc (which Jiaqing collectively called *kuaxi*)<sup>28</sup>, had the opportunity to develop and even sometimes be performed on the court stage. *Kunqu* started to lose the unconditional support of the Qing court, and its dominant position at court was gradually undermined by these newer operas. This trend was pushed much further during the following few decades.

When it came to the Daoguang era (1821-1850), the most significant shift in the court’s attitude towards opera was best demonstrated by the re-structuring of the opera administrative body and a further reduction of the court troupe actors. In 1827,

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<sup>26</sup> Until the fourth year of the Jiaqing reign, when Qianlong emperor was still in power, the total number of opera performers in court – both *neixue* (eunuch performers) and *waixue* (civilian performers) – would add up to over 1,000. For this information, see Wang Che 2003: 80.

<sup>27</sup> All the four are local genres: *luantan* was popular in Hebei and Shandong at the time; *qinqiang* was popular in the northwest of the country; *bangzi* was popular in Shaanxi and Shanxi provinces; *xiansuo* was popular in Hebei province.

<sup>28</sup> *Kuaxi* literally means local drama. The emperor used this term to refer to all those local drama forms introduced to the capital city.

Daoguang, who had openly denounced the court and elite class's excessive infatuation with opera as "extorting the ordinary people's fat and grease to provide the pleasure and entertainments of important officials and misdirecting unauthorized taxes to the detriment of my common people" (Dolby 1976: 157), had all remaining civilian actors (most of whom were from Jiangsu province) purged out of the court, and "the Southern Bureau" (*Nanfu*) established in 1740 during the Qianlong era was reorganized into the "Bureau of Ceremonial Music" (*Shengping shu*) to take charge of the remaining eunuch actors. Daoguang also terminated the practice of selecting *kunqu* actors from the Jiangnan area for the court troupes, thus cutting the link between the court stage and the birthplace of *kunqu*. All these reform measures were issued within a period of about only seven years and they took effect immediately. As of the ninth year of the Daoguang era, only 103 staff members were left in the imperial palace, less than 10% of that in the Qianlong era, and only 22% of that in the first year of the Daoguang era. With such a limited number of actors, the scale of court performances was significantly reduced, and Daoguang effectively curbed extravagance by cutting the budget for opera performances at court.<sup>29</sup> However, contrary to Daoguang's hopes of preserving *kunqu* as a refined opera for the ruling class, the expelled *kunqu* actors energized the commercial theatres outside the court. More importantly, regional operatic forms such as *xipi* and *erhuang*<sup>30</sup> underwent a sort of 'cross-pollination' with *kunqu* from which Peking opera soon emerged (Goldstein 2007: 22).

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<sup>29</sup> See Yao Shuyi 2001: 95-96, and Wang Che 2003: 81.

<sup>30</sup> *Xipi* and *erhuang* are the two main melodic styles in Peking opera that originated from Shaanxi and Jiangxi. In fact the unity of these two styles are also seen in other traditional Chinese operas such as Cantonese and Hanju opera and Anhui opera.

The reformative measures during the Jiaqing and Daoguang eras brought an end to the court opera performance structure that had been established and consolidated during the Kangxi and Qianlong eras, and opera performance was relegated to a less important position within court entertainment. Yet in a broader sense, these measures had significant impact on the overall development of traditional genres and created the favourable conditions for Peking opera to grow.

From early-Daoguang to early-Xianfeng, *kunqu* remained the dominant drama form, in terms of the number of plays that were staged inside the court. This can be seen as its last stronghold within the palace, but before long it had to surrender to the newly established Peking opera. The Xianfeng emperor enjoyed his obsession with opera even when the empire was deeply caught in the wars against the western colonial powers. In the fifth, tenth and eleventh years of his reign, he ordered actors, musicians, and stage hands to be picked from the commercial troupes outside the palace, which lifted the prohibition set by Daoguang over 30 years before. Some of these newcomers were *luantan* actors, and their participation immediately posed a threat to the status of *kunqu* at court. During less than one year at the Jehol imperial summer residence where Xianfeng and his families had shunned the British and French invasion of the capital city of Beijing, all opera performers were summoned to perform for the royal family. Among the 320 scenes staged during this period, one third came from *luantan* plays. This figure was interpreted as an indication of the resumed communication between court opera and that in the opera world outside. It also marked the foothold secured by *luantan* operas on the court stage, from which it could seek further negotiation with *kunqu*.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> For an account of court opera development in late Qing, see Zhu Jiajin 1995: 91.

Xianfeng's indulgence with opera seems to have been untimely, and was soon halted by Emperor Tongzhi (r. 1861-1875). In the second year of Tongzhi's reign, the pendulum of opera management swung back forcefully, and the court ruled that all civilian actors from commercial troupes selected in the tenth year during the Xianfeng era be sent back to their original places and that plays should be performed less frequently and by eunuch actors only, and that *kunqu* and *yiqiang* should be the primary forms.<sup>32</sup> Towards the later years of Tongzhi's reign, *luantan* plays were staged more regularly. Under such circumstances, the Qing court still tried to maintain the orthodox position of *kunqu*. However, Empress Dowager Cixi had already developed a great interest in *luantan*. Records show that in the eleventh year of Tongzhi's reign, Cixi ordered that eunuch actors shall "... learn *luantan* plays, and *kunqu*, *yiqiang* plays; both spoken parts and singing lyrics of selected plays should be auspicious..."<sup>33</sup> For the very first time, the court decree put *luantan* in front of *kunqu*. This is a clear indication of the Qing ruler's preference for *luantan*.

During the Guangxu era, drama performance in court reached another new high owing to Empress Dowager Cixi's fascination with opera. Her obsession grew to such an extent that she felt the existing court performances were too few. To resolve this, she had a special troupe organized which was staffed by eunuchs in *Changchungong* Palace, where she resided. Initially, Cixi required that this troupe learn *pihuang* (later called Peking opera) plays, and then *kunqu* and *yiqiang*. This measure, as Zhu Jiajin pointed out, can be seen as proof of Cixi's intent to raise the importance of *luantan* plays at court (Zhu Jiajin 1995: 93). Moreover, she abolished the ban on inviting actors from outside the palace, and started to summon popular

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<sup>32</sup> Yao Shuyi has a detailed account of this drastic change, see Yao Shuyi 2001: 99-100.

<sup>33</sup> Till then, *luantan* started to be used to specify *pihuang*, rather than a collective indicator of all different operas as in Qianlong times. See Wang Che 2003: 83.

stars from commercial troupes. These invited actors, entitled ‘attendants of the court’ (*gongfeng neiren*), introduced the latest opera developments from the commercial stage to the royal patrons through their performances. All the actors summoned were leading actors (*jue’r*) of various troupes, skilled both in *kunqu* and *luantan* performances.<sup>34</sup> Compared with material and monetary gains, the assurance of position these actors earned from the court was of much greater significance for *pihuang* to achieve social status and legitimacy among the literati. Thus, with the newly secured royal patronage, *pihuang* came to prominence by the turn of the twentieth century.

Although popular operas, particularly *pihuang*, made considerable progress during the Guangxu era, the court still commanded that *kunqu* plays should be included in regular court performances and required outside actors to practise more *kunqu* plays (Zhu Jiajin 1995: 95). However, these measures failed to prevent *kunqu* from further decline. The schedule of court performances in the tenth month of 1908, the final year of Guangxu’s reign, serves as a good example: as the court celebrated Cixi’s birthday, 120 scenes of performances were ordered, of which only four were from *kunqu* plays, about ten were from *yiqiang* plays, while all the rest, over 100, were from *luantan* plays. Eventually, around the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911, the fully-fledged *luantan* took over the dominant position that *kunqu* had maintained at court in previous centuries (Zhu Jiajin 1995: 96).

From this brief account of late-Qing court patronage, we see that *kunqu*’s fall from grace and Peking opera’s rise to prominence reveal that the ruling class’s positioning of a certain opera as orthodox, in this case *kunqu*, did not subdue the

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<sup>34</sup> This is known as “being adept at both *kunqu* and *luantan*” (*kun luan budang*), a requirement for becoming an accomplished actor that has been kept well into the twentieth century. See Yue Wei 2009: 57-58.

growth of popular drama among the general public, and it is the popularity of such drama, here Peking opera, that eventually changes the court's preferences. Therefore, it seems that the relationship between the court and the public, as consumers of drama performances, cannot be viewed in terms of a 'ruling versus ruled' paradigm. To appreciate the limited nature of the role the court played in *kunqu* development during this historical period, it is helpful to attach adequate importance to the commercial space for *kunqu* performances.

A final point for consideration in this section would be, "what aspects of *kunqu* were actually preserved as a result of those imperial edicts and decrees?" As the Qing rulers claimed, *kunqu* comprised the "orthodox tunes" (*zhengsheng*) allegedly inherited from the previous dynasty. The "orthodox tunes" had specific meanings and accordingly the content of plays to be performed in court underwent conspicuous adjustments before they were mounted in front of the imperial rulers and high-ranking officials. Firstly, a number of new scripts were created by specially assigned scholars to suit the needs of court performances. Most plays of this kind feature very strong undertones pertaining to moral education, praise of peace and prosperity of the dynasty, and the unification of the country. One of the most lengthy and well known plays from this category is *Golden statutes for encouraging goodness* (*Quanshan jinke*), which depicts the legendary story of Mulian saving his mother from hell. Throughout the Qing dynasty, this play was among the top selections for festival and monthly ritual performances at court. Another example is *Annals of the Tripod* (*Dingzhi chunqiu*), a work adapted from the story of the Three Kingdoms, which ends with the successful unification of China, which serves to justify the

establishment of Qing China as a unified country.<sup>35</sup> Although the specificity of such grand plays inevitably restricted the free creation of *kunqu* scripts, it served to maintain *kunqu*'s dominance at court because of the great number of actors these plays involved. Additionally, the sense of opulence and grandeur emphasized in these performances also influenced opera performances among the general public. But unlike the play scripts created for marketplace performances, these court plays were restricted to the imperial court stage, and once the genre lost favour among royal families, the plays inevitably fell into obscurity.

Secondly, the Qing court's strict censorship imposed a much tighter grip upon literary creation during the Yongzheng and Qianlong eras than during previous reigns. As Zhou Yude (2005: 262-263) observes, *kunqu* literary creation suffered a major setback during this period as most *kunqu* plays were transmitted in written form and thus could be made subject to official censorship, whereas other popular operas were mostly taught and learned without any written scripts and were thus able to evade the court's control. One of the most typical examples of official censorship on scripts created in early times is the *kunqu* classic *The Peony Pavilion*. One officially approved abridgement reveals that any sensitive content, for example, that containing either direct or indirect reference to "the barbarians", was omitted or changed (Zhou Yude 2005: 262-264).

## **1.2. From Domestic to Public Realm: the Rise of Professional Troupes**

Up to the middle of the Qing dynasty, *kunqu* was not only the dominant operatic form at court, but also among the general public, particularly in the Jiangnan

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<sup>35</sup> For an introduction to other major court plays, see Wen Xiangui 2006: 55-56.

area. Professional troupes were the primary means of fulfilling the task of entertaining the vast number of commoner audiences. As the Qing rulers banned the practice of maintaining family troupes, the number of professional troupes rapidly increased. A comparison between family troupes and professional troupes is important for our understanding of the kind of changes that enabled *kunqu* to cater to the taste of the public audiences so as to survive in a commercial setting, particularly when patronage from the court and elite class was no longer received.

Family *kunqu* troupes are “a unique phenomenon” in Chinese opera history (Liu Zhen & Xie Yongjun 2005: 84). The practice of running family troupes started in the late Ming, and then became fashionable during the Wanli reign (1573-1620) among landlords, wealthy merchants, the literati and aristocracy alike. Generally organized on a non-profit basis,<sup>36</sup> family troupes were not just the most important driving force behind *kunqu* development during this period, but also constituted a distinctive cultural phenomenon that exerted significant influence on literary and art development, as well as the entertainment choices for the masses. Owners of these troupes were responsible for the procurement of costumes and stage props and for the recruitment and training of singers. A full-sized family troupe, whether all-female (*nüyueban*) or all-male (*jiaotongban*), was typically comprised of a group of 12 singers, which was considered sufficient for a typical performance.<sup>37</sup> These singers usually came from impoverished families and would join the troupe at an early age of around 12 to 13. After several years of training, they would start performances in the form of singing without percussion (*qingchang*), or singing and dancing (*gewu*),

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<sup>36</sup> There were exceptions when family troupes made profit through tour performances.

<sup>37</sup> Apart from these two types of troupes, some rich families were able to organise a third type of troupe staffed with professional troupe actors. These actors were usually older, but with much better skills so were capable of staging a lot more plays. See Wang Tingxin 2005: 167-168.



or full costumed performance (*quanxi*), which were mostly held at family banquets or receptions. Most of the family troupe owners were *kunqu* enthusiasts who had a profound knowledge of *kunqu* composition and were either capable of training the performers themselves, or were rich enough to employ professional tutors. In fact, the aesthetic style of family troupes greatly influenced the development of professional troupes, and set the trend of opera development at that time (Zhu Jianhua 2005: 44).

As the Ming dynasty came to an end, these family troupes were confronted with a drastic social transformation when, owing to the early-Qing court-ordered prohibition, the number of family troupes was drastically reduced. In the second year of his reign, the Yongzheng emperor issued this edict:

... the keeping of [kunqu] singers in family troupes by officials outside the capital city is not proper conduct. I am fully aware of the severity of this problem: such officials harass the common people by abusing their power, or offer singers to other officials as bribes, or even stir up troubles through the network they form with their peers... Any official who keeps family troupes doesn't have adequate integrity... From now on, all governors and officials should carry out discreet inspections....Anyone who fails to do so, or dares to cover up shall be severely punished (in Zhou Yude 2005: 254-255).

Like the bans on popular opera issued around the same time, the rulers' major concerns were of a political nature pertaining to social order and bureaucratic efficiency.

As opposed to the family troupes, the professional troupes were organized with the primary purpose of making profit. When *kunqu* grew into the most popular opera in Ming times, a large number of professional *kunqu* troupes were organized to meet the growing demands of the market. The majority of these troupes were performing in Zhejiang and Jiangsu provinces in the South, and Hebei and Beijing in the North. As independent organizations, these troupes were not specifically attached to any

single family and, consequently, they enjoyed more freedom than did family troupes. Their market-oriented strategy and their heterogeneous audience base, which included both well-off people and the general public, distinguished them from family troupes and court troupes.<sup>38</sup> These professional troupes' confrontation, negotiation, and coexistence with troupes of other operatic genres offer us a major context in which the trajectory of *kunqu* development can be examined.

During the Kangxi era, professional troupes enjoyed great popularity and their performances were watched by audiences from city and countryside alike in most parts of the country.<sup>39</sup> But this did not last long. In Beijing, the decline of *kunqu* was not just seen in the purge of court singers, but also with the closure of professional troupes. In the early Daoguang years, a new *kunqu* troupe called *Jifang ban* was organized by some senior singers with the aim of reversing the downturn in the local market. With a proper strategy including advertising, performances by this troupe drew large audiences. One commentator, named Yang Yujian, described this brief popularity of the troupe as,

... prior to the performance they put up many posters to inform the locals in the capital, many of whom then were eager to attend the show. On the day of the performance, the audience always exceeded 1,000. They listened so attentively that nobody ever made any noise. As they took bookings, the seats were always taken in four or five days in advance. During that period, no other troupes could match the fame of *Jifang ban* troupe (Yang cited in Fan Limin & Fan Hongyan 2005: 37).

However, the troupe ceased to exist within only half a year, marking the end of *kunqu* prominence in the Beijing market. Fan Limin and Fan Hongyan (2005) attributed this failure to the singers' unwillingness to reform *kunqu*'s artistic style as

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<sup>38</sup> There were exceptions to this. The family troupe of early Qing dramatist Li Yu (1611-1680) toured extensively, and the family troupe owned by another scholar Mao Pi Jiang (1611-1693) even became a money generator. These and some other examples show that sometimes there can be a very blurry dividing line between family troupes and professional troupes.

<sup>39</sup> Wang Tingxin examined the popularity of professional troupes in this time, see Wang Tingxin 2005: 172-180.

well as the public's distaste for the over complex music and abstruse lyrics. Providing another example of the decline of *kunqu* since late-Qing times, this account shows us how *kunqu*'s market share dwindled while other popular operas benefited. From this point on, *kunqu* performances no longer had their own stage and were treated as adjuncts to Peking opera in mixed stage shows. In most cases, *kunqu* plays were arranged as "starter" scenes (*zao Zhouzi*) to be performed when some audience were yet to show up. Even when *kunqu* plays were scheduled to be performed during prime time, audiences usually left for toilet breaks as soon as the singers mounted the stage (Fan Limin & Fan Hongyan 2005: 38). The following quote from a historical account further illustrates how *kunqu* lost ground to Peking opera in the capital city:

... when it came to the Guangxu years, *kunqu* found itself caught in such a difficult situation as 'being too highbrow for the general public' (*qugao hegua*). Despite the fact that some tried really hard to revive it, the majority of the audiences had the final say in declining which drama would become popular. The troupes would perform whatever the audiences liked best. Under such circumstances, most troupe managers could not afford to put too much emphasis on the training of *kunqu* actors. This was why *kunqu* tutors, students and musicians became a lot less. In the end, only one *kunqu* scene was scheduled for those who fancied it, but just a while later, even this single *kunqu* scene was cancelled all together... (Mei Lanfang & Xu Jichuan 2001: 116-117)

At around the fall of the Qing dynasty, very few opera actors in Beijing specialized solely in *kunqu* plays. According to Fan Limin and Fan Hongyan (2005: 39), after the twenty-fourth year of Guangxu era (i.e. 1899), there were 104 opera actors in Beijing, among whom 92 specialized in *luantan*, 9 were good at both *kunqu* and *luantan*, while only 3 specialized in *kunqu*. When the famous actor, Xiao Jinhui, left the city in 1910, *kunqu* performances in Beijing came to a complete halt, and it was not until 1917, when the *Rongqing she* Troupe, organized by the famous *kunqu*

actor, Han Shichang, entered Beijing, that *kunqu* performances resumed.<sup>40</sup> After *pihuang* came to dominate the opera scene in Beijing, *kunqu* was forced to retreat to the South, mainly to the cities of Suzhou, Yangzhou, and Shanghai. However, professional *kunqu* troupes met with a similar fate in these southern centres. Within only another few years, Peking opera pursued and claimed a further share of the southern drama market.

It would be wrong if we assumed that firstly, *kunqu* singers had developed contempt for the rapidly rising Peking opera, and other *luantan* dramas, during this late-Qing *ya* (elegance) versus *su* (crude and folksy) contention, and/or secondly, that *kunqu* had lost ground without any active attempt to resist. The brief history of the *kunqu* playhouse, *Sanya yuan*, located in the burgeoning port city of Shanghai serves as a very good example, revealing how *kunqu* singers had tried to apply the latest technologies and marketing strategies to win their share of the available audience. One and half centuries later, Pai Hsien-yung and his team adopted similar approach to construct new *kunqu* audience – the use of new technologies and latest marketing strategies.

Since opening as a treaty port in the late nineteenth century, Shanghai had begun to develop into a new and rising metropolis. With its rapid rise, Shanghai quickly overshadowed its neighbouring cities Suzhou, Nanjing and Yangzhou, and became a powerful magnet to the entertainment industry, and this created a burgeoning middle class with money to spend and a taste for opera performances. The effect of the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864) on the economies of the Jiangnan cities also contributed to the rise of Shanghai. It was under such circumstances that

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<sup>40</sup> For this part of *kunqu* history, see for instance Lu Eting 1980: 269.

Shanghai became the new centre of *kunqu* performances during the second half of the nineteenth century. Zhu Lin and Chi Zihua (2006) have shown that the first professional *kunqu* playhouse in Shanghai, the *Sanya yuan* opened in 1851, enjoying a brief period of prosperity before Peking opera entered the local market soon after and immediately became its most powerful rival. Caught in such fierce competition, the *Sanya yuan* adopted a series of marketing strategies to promote its *kunqu* performances. Fully aware of the potential of the media, the owners used *Shenbao*, one of the earliest Chinese-language newspapers in Shanghai, as their main platform for publicity. Other methods of attracting audiences, such as free gift-giving and flexible price ranges also proved effective. The gradual development of opera singer stardom in Shanghai also proved highly effective in increasing a playhouse's fame and accordingly, the *Sanya yuan* invited celebrated non-*kunqu* singers to appear on its stage as guest players. With these flexible measures, the *Sanya yuan* established its reputation and secured its share of the market.

Other than experimentation with marketing strategies, the *Sanya yuan* also made considerable changes in its repertoire, performance arrangements, and stage setting, all of which marked a departure from conventional *kunqu* performances around the country. Firstly, the *Sanya yuan* increased martial art plays on its daily schedule so as to bring freshness to the performances and change the stereotypical image of *kunqu* as a gentle and slow opera. Secondly, it was dedicated to mounting a number of stage productions dubbed as "new plays" in its advertising. Some of these were re-choreographed works based on existing classical plays, while others were completely new productions based on old play texts but without any previous stage versions as references. These new adaptations share a common feature of vulgarity,

light-heartedness and humour; vastly different from the conventional *kunqu* aesthetics of “civility and elegance” (*wenya*). Thirdly, considerable efforts were made at improving stage visual effects. The most important measure was the adoption of “colour lighting” (*dengcai*)<sup>41</sup> techniques, a popular stage lighting and setting innovation developed in the late Qing years. As the term denotes, *dengcai* techniques basically involved the use of all kinds of lights – mainly lanterns at the time – to create various lighting effects. Through further experiment and development, these techniques also involved different kinds of stage scenery construction and creative prop usage.

Since the earliest performances, traditional Chinese opera had observed the unique traditional aesthetic of being abstract, which explains why the conventional Chinese stage is bare. The setting of a story depicted on-stage was traditionally expressed through lyrics and singing and stylized acting techniques. *Kunqu* performances also observed this minimalist principle, yet in the *dengcai* practices, a range of stage settings were made by using real objects as props. For instance, the *Sanya yuan* re-produced the classic *kunqu* play, *Longing for Worldly Pleasure* (*Sifan*), by using *dengcai* techniques. It was advertised that “...real Buddhist statues will be put on stage; costumes for the actors are made of brand-new embroidered silks; all costumes for the statues and actors will change colour on stage without any hidden tricks. It is guaranteed to be spectacular...” (Zhu Lin & Chi Zihua 2006: 99).

In another example, actors abandoned the conventional practice of signalling horses with a whip, and put on stage some model horses framed with bamboo strips decorated with colourful fabric (Zhu Lin 2007: 209). Innovations of this kind greatly

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<sup>41</sup> These are innovative lighting and scenery building techniques. Due to its popularity, this practice was widely adopted in drama performances throughout the country at the time. See Fan Limin & Fan Hongyan 2005: 40; Zhu Lin & Chi Zihua 2006: 99.

improved the visual effect of the *Sanya yuan*'s stage shows and they were well received by audiences. Introduced by *kunqu* singers, innovative *dengcai* techniques constitute an important attempt to break through the barriers presented by traditional aesthetic conventions and their efforts were considered by some scholars as to have painted "one of the most dazzling pages in *kunqu* history in late Qing Shanghai" (Zhu Lin 2007: 208). All of these strategies helped the *Sanya yuan* survive amidst fierce competition in the local market which was dominated by Peking opera, and the *Sanya yuan* continued to stage *kunqu* plays till 1891.

Modern dramatists have tried to uncover the real reasons behind the eventual failure of the *Sanya yuan*. Zhao Jingshen laments that "it is pathetic" that in such a moment of crisis, they just adopted measures such as offering free gifts to attract audiences rather than "starting with the reform of innate artistic features [of *kunqu*]" (cited in Lu Eting 1980: 3). The new stage productions, on the other hand, were considered to be fatally flawed, because they lacked "guiding principles" for the construction of connotations thus should not be considered as real progress (Gu Duhuang 1987: 194). It seems that the critics cannot reach an agreement on the reasons for the *Sanya yuan*'s rise and fall. One might criticize the playhouse's desperate pandering to its potential audiences, and the flashiness and extravaganza of its stage productions. But it is also important to note that in the playhouse's market exploration, it introduced new techniques and innovations, such as *dengcai*, to develop its stage settings. Innovative practice of a similar kind has actually appeared in Pai's stage production and other recent *kunqu* works. This can be seen as a recurrent trend along *kunqu* history.

### 1.3. The Maturation of Excerpted-scene Performances

The development of *kunqu* during the late Qing years is not just seen in the shift of its prime performing space from the private to the public realm, but also in the popularization of a new performing style known as excerpted-scenes (*zhezi xi*). Although this performing style had appeared during the late Ming, it was during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that it reached maturity, and it is these excerpted-scenes that have formed the bulk of *kunqu* repertoire inherited by generations ever since. Also, the coming-of-age of the excerpted-scenes style marks the shift from a literati-centred production mechanism, dating back to the late-Ming, to an actor-centred mechanism. The actors earned this autonomy simply because, once the public realm was opened as the dominant performing space, it was they themselves who were the very factor that linked the general public with the stage works.

The popularization of excerpted-scenes is viewed by some modern dramtists as a “revolution on *kunqu* classic works by the actors from professional troupes” (Song Bo 2005: 200). In these reworked scenes, the original literary and musical features were not necessarily changed, yet the actors’ modifications and creative reinterpretations effectively altered the focus of *kunqu* appreciation so that story plots became less important than the actors’ virtuosity in both singing and acting. Through this development, each excerpted-scene that survived became a superb, independent work in its own right.

It is not difficult to understand why excerpted-scenes became necessary in the first place. On the one hand, most *kunqu* scripts have at least twenty scenes, and to mount an entire story would have required considerable amounts of time. *The Palace of Eternal Youth* (*Changsheng dian*) and *The Peach Blossom Fan* (*Taohua shan*)



from the seventeenth century are widely considered to be the last two masterpieces in *kunqu* history, and ever since then, no works of any real significance have been written. Without any new high-quality plays to hit the market, actors started to polish certain sections from classical works. This is how excerpted-scene performances became a desirable choice in both private settings and in the marketplace – when needed, an assortment of best-liked scenes from different plays were picked and played together. Yet it was not until mid-Qing that this practice became widely accepted in public. The famous *kunqu* anthology *Zhuibaiqiu*,<sup>42</sup> published during the Qianlong era, is purported to be the most complete collection of excerpted-scenes staged during the eighteenth century.

As a direct result of the market-oriented approach at a time when *kunqu* was confronted with fierce competition from other popular dramas, the rise of excerpted-scene performances attests to the dynamics of *kunqu* as an operatic genre even at a time of crisis. The ingenuity and creativity of the actors were brought into full play when these excerpted-scenes were produced and it is through the maturation of excerpted-scene performances that *kunqu* performing conventions were perfected. I will now examine how these conventions developed in relation to two aspects: the further innovations in stage acting and costuming, and the final establishment of *kunqu* role categorization.

As Weng Minhua (2006: 31-32) points out, excerpted-scene performances were the “re-creation” of *kunqu* works by the actors. It was done on the basis of first-hand stage performing experiences and all revision and creation were designed to enhance the drawing power of their stage works, and audience preferences were

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<sup>42</sup> *Zhuibaiqiu* (lit. making a coat with the fur of a hundred foxes) is a selected work that included the most popular excerpted scenes from famous *kunqu* plays. It reflected the choice of the public at the time. See Song Bo 2005: 196.

taken as a primary consideration. Sometimes, scenes selected from classic works needed only minor modifications, yet it was not unusual for a very short and unimportant section from an original text to be reworked into a highly popular scene through ingenious and bold adjustments. To illustrate this, I will present two re-created scenes from the popularized stage version of the masterpiece *The Peony Pavilion*. Both scenes, taking shape during the mid-Qing and still widely performed today, will reveal the extent of creative and often drastic changes that were made to the original works. By looking at these changes and the changes made in Pai's new adaptation (which will be discussed in Chapter 3), we will see how innovations have been a persistent feature in different period of *kunqu* history.

As the seventh scene in Tang Xianzu's original text of *Peony*, "The Schoolroom" (*guishu*) depicts the first day of lessons for the protagonist, Du Liniang, when her tutor explains the first poem in the *Classic of Poetry* (*Shijing*). The importance of this scene is that it represents Du's sensual awakening. This scene was revised and retitled "Chunxiang's Mischief in the Classroom" (*Chunxiang naoxue*)<sup>43</sup> during the Qianlong era. A comparison between the revised version and the original scene reveals that some significant changes were made. For example, Du's maid, Chunxiang, is portrayed as the central character in the revised version whereas in the original she is just a supporting character. Additionally, Chunxiang's mischievous behaviour - for example, her teasing of the tutor about getting up early for class, her misinterpretation of the classical phrases in the poem as vernacular language, her sneaking out into the garden during her bathroom break, her defiance against the tutor's reproach – are all portrayed in greater detail and vividness. New dialogues

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<sup>43</sup> For a complete text of this revised scene, see Xu Fuming 1987: 199-205.

and actions were also added where necessary to highlight the theatrical conflict between characters. In the original, this scene deals with Du Linxiang's sensual awakening and serves as a prelude to Du's wandering in the garden. Yet in the revised work, Du's sensual awakening is replaced by Chunxiang's brave defiance of the tutor's pedantry. As Xu Fuming (1987: 205) observes, by highlighting the central character's "mischievousness", the new work is "full of real life breath and comic effect." In fact, among all excerpted-scenes from *Peony* that are still performed on the *kunqu* stage today, this one was revised to the greatest extent, and is still the best-liked (Xu Fuming 1987: 205). This scene is also listed among the signature works for the role type of "vivacious young female" (*tie dan*), a subcategory of female role type in *kunqu*.

Another noticeable change made on *Peony* is the creation of a new scene – "The Gathering of Floral Gods" (*duihua*) - based on a very short section taken from the tenth scene, "Interrupted Dream" (*jingmeng*), from Tang's text. According to the original script, a "supporting male role" (*mo*) actor dressed as a floral god enters the stage, makes a brief self-introduction, sings a short aria, and then exits the stage. This character's brief appearance is designed to protect the protagonists' sexual encounter in the garden. Towards the middle of the Qing dynasty, this floral god was assigned four more newly-written arias, and his short performance was gradually developed into a celebratory presentation. When it came to the Qianlong era, with further enrichment, this section grew into such a length that it was ready to be separated off as an independent scene. After the Yongzheng reign, 12 actors were put on stage as floral gods and the scene developed into a spectacle with newly choreographed actions and new arias. Representing all 12 months of the year, these characters were

played by actors of different roles. With their differently styled and coloured costumes, and props of various kinds, their group presentation was always a dazzling feast for the audiences' eyes.<sup>44</sup> It was one of the few "auspicious" *kunqu* works to be played in front of the Qianlong emperor during his second southern tour in 1757. It was also highly popular with the public and many troupes were more than willing to invest great sums on this scene alone hoping to capitalize on its popularity. For instance, a troupe from Yangzhou city spent ten thousand taels of gold to produce costumes for the 12 floral gods.<sup>45</sup> This newly created scene was passed down, and further improvements were made in both costuming and choreography by different generations of actors. These above examples are just two of the numerous cases in which *kunqu* actors revised the best-liked sections of different classical plays.<sup>46</sup>

Here, I wish to take a general look at the construction of excerpted scenes and to stress its impact for the overall development of *kunqu*. All these reworked stage productions eventually built up the repertoire of selected-scene performances, and formed what Chen Fang (2006: 167-168) terms "traditions of Qianlong and Jiaqing times" (*Qianjia chuantong*) – the formalized costuming and acting conventions that took shape during this period of time. Revisions and creations of this kind, as Liu Shuli (2005: 18) concludes, are different from the revision by literati on the same works, because the actors' revisions are more audience-oriented and "feature more popularization and theatricality, and display real life flavour" so they could better suit the needs of audiences from different backgrounds. This repertoire that contains several hundred scenes was not only the legacy for *kunqu* development, but also "a

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<sup>44</sup> For a detailed description of this creation, see Xu Fuming 1987: 173-176; Liu Shuli 2005: 16-17; Wang Yanfei: 2005: 132-134.

<sup>45</sup> Wang Yanfei 2005: 132-134.

<sup>46</sup> For a detailed analysis on the various approaches through which excerpted scenes were constructed, see Zhu Lin 2003: 197-214.

treasure house that nourished the birth and development of many other operas, including Peking opera” (Li Jing 2008: 7-8).

Apart from the enrichment of the *kunqu* repertoire, another significant result of the maturation of excerpted-scenes would be the establishment of *kunqu* role type categorization. It is not until the excerpted-scene performing mechanism reached its maturity during the Qianlong and Jiaqing eras that the *kunqu* stage, previously dominated by “young male” (*sheng*) and “young female” (*dan*) characters,<sup>47</sup> was transformed into one that was equally shared between a variety of role types - males (*sheng*), females (*dan*), painted faces (*jing*), supporting characters (*mo*) and comic (*chou*). These five general categories were then further divided into 12 variants based on sex, age, and social status of the characters.<sup>48</sup> Strict customs were also formed to specify the standard equipment for different costumes and property chests for the different role types.<sup>49</sup> It is also during this period that all these role types acquired their own signature scenes, each scene with its own particular central “selling point” (*kandian*).<sup>50</sup> Since its early history, *kunqu* was considered to be an art of elegance, and this feature became the very reason for many commoner audiences to shun it as a boring art form. With the establishment of this multiple role type category, the greatly varied performing skills fulfilled a crucial role in winning larger audiences in the face of competition from other operas. It is also these stylized performing skills of all role types that have formed what are called “the legacy of *kunqu*” today.

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<sup>47</sup> The reason for this is that the previous performances were predominantly full-story mountings, most of which were romances between young males and females.

<sup>48</sup> For detailed development of this categorization, see Liu Zhen & Xie Yongjun 2005: 223-226; Song Bo 2005: 198. I have included a list of the names and brief description of all major *kunqu* role-types in this work. See Appendix 4.

<sup>49</sup> For a detailed account of this custom, see Zhongguo de kunqu yishu 2005: 138-142; Song Bo 2005: 198-199.

<sup>50</sup> For examples of such selling points, see Wang Jing 2008: 40-46.

As opposed to the further development of acting techniques, *kunqu* singing during the Qing dynasty (and in subsequent eras) is characterized by inheritance rather than innovation – this is because the musical system was well developed with highly stylized rules. As Wu Xinlei (2005: 8) observes, the major achievements of Qing dramatists can be seen in their cataloguing of the well developed *kunqu* music system. Specifically, their work involved two aspects; recording the music notations of existing performances (*gongche pu*); and compiling rhyming and tuning dictionaries (*gelü pu*). All their records and compilations were used as important references for *kunqu* artists of the subsequent ages – the former for singing, and the latter for the creation of new music.

#### **1.4. On the Brink of Extinction: *Kunqu* in the Early Twentieth Century**

In his account of *kunqu* during the late-Qing, Mackerras (1983: 109) relates the decline of *kunqu*, the rise of popular operas, and the beginning of spoken drama to the demise of the Confucian ruling classes and the rise of the anti-Confucian rebellious movement during the late Qing. He claims that theatre at the time was playing a role in influencing general attitudes among the public as well as the direction of the anti-Confucian movement. The politicization of drama is best revealed in the beginning of “civilization dramas” (*wenming xi*). In this section, after a brief account of the social and cultural background, I will focus on the further decline of *kunqu* around the 1910s, and the endeavours made by a few ardent supporters that saved the genre from extinction.

By 1902, Liang Qichao had already proclaimed the necessity for a new literature or drama in his famous essay “On the relationship between literature and

the government of the people” (*Lun xiaoshuo yu chunzhi zhi guanxi*). He asserted that both fiction and drama have “the incredible power of guiding human behaviours” (Liang cited in Zhou Yude 2005: 287). As a response to this essay, China’s very first drama magazine, *The Stage of the Twentieth Century* (*Ershi shiji da wutai*), was launched in 1904 with the aim of advocating democratic revolution. In the launch issue, several articles were published arguing that drama could be used for political good. Some elitists, in response to this proposal, started writing *kunqu* plays in the literary form of Ming drama (*chuanqi*) and variety shows (*zaju*), and this became a popular practice for some time among reformists and revolutionaries. Quite a number of plays bearing strong political features were produced during these few years, some by authors who did not actually have adequate specialized knowledge of *kunqu* or *zaju*, while a few others were written by *kunqu* experts such as Wu Mei and Hong Bingwen.<sup>51</sup>

Soon after the founding of the Republic in 1912, the famous drama theorist, Yao Hua (1876-1930), a *kunqu* fanatic, openly preached that *kunqu* was “the embodiment of peace and a representation of culture,” and that it should be restored by the Republican government as the orthodox music (Yao cited in Wu Xinlei 2005: 14). This assertion was relentlessly attacked by Hu Shi in his essay, “The evolutionary idea of literature and theatre reform” (*Wenxue jinhua guannian yu xiju gailiang*) that was published in *New Youth* (*Xin qingnian*) in October 1918. Based on Darwin’s theory of evolution, Hu argued that each generation has its own literature, and that all transformations from Tang poetry to Song lyrics and from *kunqu* to Peking opera were testament to the progress of culture and the arts (Wu Xinlei 2005:

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<sup>51</sup> For a detailed list of these revolution-themed new *kunqu* plays, see Zhou Yude 2005: 288-293.

15). However, while Hu justified the rise of popular dramas over *kunqu*, he also criticized the vulgarity of these new dramas. Related to this question of which opera would be the most suitable genre, public discussion about drama development during this period of time also centred on the hybrid development of traditional drama, particularly Peking opera. Experiments were made both on onstage aesthetics and literary creation. But the critical debate on such experiments was very complex. By the 1920s, hybrid dramas were condemned by both cultural iconoclasts and traditional drama conservationists, and a clear division was required to be marked between the newly developed western style spoken drama (*huaju*) and traditional Chinese drama (*xiqu*). This particular phenomenon in the drama world during this period was in line with the cultural realignment of the May Fourth era.<sup>52</sup> Despite being involved in the theatrical debate, *kunqu* in the 1910s did not win much development; on the contrary, it was stuck in further decline. The 1920s was the decade that witnessed the launch of Peking opera as a vehicle for building nationalism and the rise of film as a popular entertainment form; both of which applied further pressure on *kunqu*.

The Chinese National Drama Movement (*guoju yundong*) was initiated by the drama department of Beijing Arts Academy in 1925. Peking opera was only one of the many operatic genres that competed for the title of “national drama” (*guoju*), and its eventual success in this race involved a lot of efforts by its supporters represented by the renowned dramatist Qi Rushan. As Goldstein observes, the retrofitting of Peking opera into a national genre involved various forms of revision, in both the ways it was scripted and performed, and in the ways it was interpreted and marketed.

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<sup>52</sup> For a detailed analysis of this complicated theoretical debate on hybrid drama around May Fourth Movement, see Goldstein 2007: 134-137.



It was only after it had earned a combination of popular following and cultural and political credibility that Peking opera was finally launched as a national cultural symbol.<sup>53</sup> One of the major reasons why *kunqu* lost out in this selection is not its decline, but, as the renowned dramatist Qi Rushan argues, the innate nature of the opera: *kunqu* was “based on southern dialect and was not comprehensible to all Chinese” (Qi cited in Goldstein 2007: 156).

During the first half of the 1920s, film developed into an independent entertainment form within large cities and its influence was reported in the press, and was likened to a surging spring wave that aroused a national craze. The Chinese entertainment world quickly saw the formation of two audience camps: theatre goers (*piaoyou*) and cinema fans (*yingmi*). Amid this competition for market share, Chinese dramas, including not just Peking opera and *kunqu*, but also other regional operas, were often grouped in the one party that represented traditional Chinese values and cultural conventions. Consequently, *kunqu* found itself caught in an even more difficult position of competition.

The period from 1910s to 1930s is generally treated by *kunqu* historians as the period when *kunqu* declined to the brink of extinction.<sup>54</sup> Within just a few years after the outbreak of the second Sino-Japanese war in 1937, all professional *kunqu* troupes were disbanded. There is one point in particular during the early 1920s *kunqu* historiography that I wish to point out for attention. Numerous historians refer to *kunqu* in 1920s and 1930s as being in a most desperate situation and assert that the existence of *kunqu* was maintained by the only Suzhou professional troupe, *Quanfu ban*, in the early 1920s, and *Xin yuefu* in the late 1920s, which was then reorganized

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<sup>53</sup> See chapter 5 in Goldstein 2007.

<sup>54</sup> See for instance Song Bo 2005: 231-232.

as *Xianni she* in the 1930s.<sup>55</sup> This assertion needs to be situated in such a context whereby Suzhou *kunqu* is treated as the most authentic, and thus most representative form of *kunqu* performance among all variants. In fact, by taking a broader view, we will find that *kunqu* performances were also seen in other parts of the country during this period. Here I will examine the survival of *kunqu* during the 1920s and 1930s by focusing on a training school in Suzhou and amateur *kunqu* societies.

The Suzhou *Kunqu* Training School (*Suzhou kunju chuanxi suo*) deserves examination since it is this school that maintained the artistic lineage of Suzhou *kunqu* during this time of crisis. The graduates of this school became the most important group of *kunqu* artists in the decades that followed. With investment from a group of Suzhou entrepreneurs<sup>56</sup> who felt the urge to save *kunqu* from extinction, the training school opened in August 1921 on the private property of one of the patrons. All tutors were ex-actors from the disbanded *Quanfu ban* troupe. The school took about 60 students in two rounds of enrolment, all of whom were from poverty-stricken families, or relatives of the *Quanfu ban* actor teachers.<sup>57</sup>

Judging solely from the indenturing enrolment system, one might consider this school was no different to any other opera institution, where severe punishment for improper performance during training was the norm, and impoverished living conditions were commonplace. However, the school adopted a new method of training that was considered to be the first civilized training method in *kunqu* history to date (Zhou Qin 2004: 262). Firstly, the school provided adequate food and accommodation for all students, dedicated carers were responsible for laundry, and

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<sup>55</sup> For examples, see *Zhongguo de kunqu yishu* 2005: 39-42;

<sup>56</sup> They were Bei Jinmei, Zhang Zidong, Xu Jingqing and Mu Ouchu. See Zhou Bing & Jiang Wenbo 2009: 94-96.

<sup>57</sup> For a detailed introduction to this training school, see Zhou Bing & Jiang Wenbo 2009: 92-98.

the students were granted three home visits each month, all of which were yet to have been adopted by other drama training schools (Sang Yuxi 2010: 7). During the entire course of six years of study and training, the students were trained in *kunqu* performance in basically the same manner as at previous *kunqu* training schools and troupes. Here however, corporal punishment was banished, and students also had the chance to receive a literary and cultural education – an education that provided lifelong benefits.

In terms of acting training, this school was distinctive with regard to two aspects: firstly, it required that, when learning a new play, each student learn by heart the entire play including all reciting and singing parts no matter which role he was going to play during the performance; secondly, each student received a set of musical instruments, some for *wenchang* (civil stage), and others for *wuchang* (martial arts scenes).<sup>58</sup> During their training, the students learnt both how to sing and how to play the instruments. As one of the actors from this school Fang Chuanyun recalls, these instruments helped them to keep in tune when learning the singing, and they were able to learn *kunqu* music notations much quicker than would have been possible without instruments (Sang Yuxi 2010: 9).

As these young *kunqu* learners were the only batch of students to be trained in such a time of crisis, they bore much expectation from the *kunqu* circle to grow into qualified inheritors of the art. Each of these students was given a new name with “*chuan*” as the second character in it, thus they were collectively referred to as the “*chuan*” generation actors (*chuanzibei yanyuan*).<sup>59</sup> After six years of hard training

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<sup>58</sup> Traditionally, *kunqu* mainly depicts *wenchang*, i.e., a romance accompanied by slow-paced percussions, while it does sometimes has *wuchang*, i.e., martial arts performance.

<sup>59</sup> *Chuan*, literally meaning to inherit, to pass on, was specifically chosen to express the wish that these young students were expected to pass on *kunqu* art to the future generations. See Zhou Qin 2004: 264-266; Sang Yuxi

and studies, all students eventually grew into actors capable of performing a wide range of *kunqu* plays. In 1927, the school's key patron, Mu Ouchu, suffered severe business failure and was no longer able to offer financial support. The school was subsequently taken over by Yan Huiyu and Tao Xiquan who launched a troupe named *Xin yuefu*, taking the majority of the graduates from the training school as its staff.

The new troupe was based in the French concession in Shanghai and was ready to explore the local market. Like the *kunqu* playhouse *Sanya yuan* that existed in Shanghai half a century before, *Xin yuefu* had to adopt the best possible measures to compete. The most typical example of this is the payment system it copied from Peking opera troupes. This was known as the 'packet silver' system (*baoyin*), under which each actor's monthly pay rate was fixed according to his artistic attainment and popularity with audiences. The highest pay was 100 *yuan* and the lowest only 20.<sup>60</sup> With this payment system, the troupe was trying to introduce the lucrative "star-system"<sup>61</sup> from Peking opera circle whereby the more famous the star became, the higher the payment rose. However, this reformative method did not work well with the unique role allocation system used within *kunqu* circle, where no one was trained solely to perform supporting roles or work as stagehands. Therefore, no matter how accomplished and famous one actor might become in a specialized role type, he would need to play minor roles for others when he was not playing his own leading role. Under this arrangement, all actors were supposed to be treated as equally important. This is one of the reasons why the new payment system created

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2010: 22.

<sup>60</sup> For details, see Sang Yuxi 2010: 59.

<sup>61</sup> The star-system is also referred to as "*mingxing zhi*" or "*mingjue'r zhi*". According to Catherine Vince Yeh, this system began in 1896 when Tan Xinpei was invited to perform for the Empress Dowager Ci Xi, he brought with him for the first time top musicians selected by himself. This system features a leading actor assembling a troupe around himself. See Yeh 2004: 91.

disputes, and eventually resulted in the suspension of the troupe's business in June 1931.<sup>62</sup>

In October 1931, the troupe was reorganized as *Xianni she*, and its return to the Shanghai market was an instant hit. However, the Japanese attack on Shanghai the following year curtailed performances and thereafter, the troupe had to travel between Shanghai, Suzhou, and their neighbouring cities in order to escape the conflict and try to maintain their business. After 1935, the situation became even worse. The troupe started to tour around the countryside in Zhejiang and Jiangsu in order to make a living. After another several years of struggle within the war-torn area, *Xianni she*, the last professional *kunqu* troupe of the twentieth century, finally succumbed and disbanded in February 1942.<sup>63</sup>

Although the actors from the Suzhou training school are popularly considered the single most important group of *kunqu* practitioners between 1920s and 1940s, some other factors also contributed to the survival of *kunqu* during the Republic era even though these forces generated very limited influence in the *kunqu* circle. Firstly, there were some professional troupes founded elsewhere around the country. For example, some troupes still travelled around the countryside of Zhejiang and Hunan provinces while performances were still taking place in urban areas like Shanghai and Suzhou, although much less frequently than in the provinces. The Beijing-based *Rongqing she* Troupe was an important base for *kunqu* survival in the North. This troupe was in active business between 1918 and 1935, and its lead singer, Han Shichang (1897-1977), enjoyed fame almost on a par with the Peking opera master, Mei Lanfang. During these years, the troupe performed in major cities such as

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<sup>62</sup> Sang Yuxi 2010: 19-20.

<sup>63</sup> Zhou Qin 2004: 267-268. .

Tianjin and Shanghai, and aroused a new wave of interest in *kunqu* among local audiences. Han Shichang even earned the title of “*kunqu* king” after the troupe’s month-long performance tour around Japan in 1928.<sup>64</sup> Despite the relative scarcity of stage performance activities compared to Peking opera, *kunqu* supporters and drama fanatics took advantage of printed media by publicizing *kunqu* through their comments and criticisms in major newspapers in the big cities.<sup>65</sup>

Finally, amateur *kunqu* societies (known as *qushe*, *quju* or *quhui*) also deserve some attention in this discussion due to their importance for modern *kunqu* history. As loosely bound organizations that gathered together amateur singers, *kunqu* societies were made up of regular members who usually performed *kunqu* in two forms: singing without percussion (*qingchang*), and amateur stage performance (*kechuan*). The tradition of organizing *kunqu* societies can be traced back to the end of the Ming and early Qing dynasty. One could join a society provided that he met certain criteria set by that particular society.

As *kunqu*’s place of origin, Suzhou and the surrounding Jiangnan area had more *kunqu* societies than anywhere else in China. Even when societies in other areas were disbanded around the turn of the twentieth century, societies in this region still held regular activities. *Kunqu* societies were not organized to make a profit and were maintained by membership fees and sometimes financial support from rich patrons. These societies offered *kunqu* fans the opportunity to appreciate *kunqu* music, lyrics, and singing, and to learn and practice performing skills together. Sometimes, societies would be invited to perform at banquets and other special occasions.

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<sup>64</sup> For details, see Wu Xinlei 2005: 146-149.

<sup>65</sup> For a detailed account of *kunqu* promotion through the press, see Chapter 5 in Wu Xinlei 2005.

The peak period of *kunqu* society development on the Chinese mainland was between the late-Qing years and the end of the 1930s with the outbreak of the second Sino-Japanese war. During the first half of this period, participants in *kunqu* societies, as loyal fans of the opera, came together not just out of interest or for entertainment, but with a full awareness of the social situation and *kunqu*'s loss of its market share as they organized activities with the aim of passing *kunqu* traditions on to a new generation of performers. Most society members had real expertise in *kunqu* music, and they always attached importance to *qingchang*, as a way of marking the distinction between themselves and the professional actors, who would act out performances rather than just sing them.

Wu Xinlei's *Chinese Kunju Dictionary* (2002) provides a complete list of *kunqu* societies world-wide throughout the *kunqu* history. Take the Jiangnan area for example: of the 60 active societies, 17 were established before 1915, while the remaining 43 were established after 1915.<sup>66</sup> Given the fact that professional *kunqu* troupes had all but one died out during the 1910s while the last family troupe had been disbanded at a much earlier date, it was these amateur societies that offered one of the most important sanctuaries in which *kunqu* might survive.

The value of these societies is more noticeable in their strict standard of training and performances. Mere casual interest in *kunqu* did not qualify someone to become a society member. Instead, participants normally underwent a test of their singing skills as a minimum requirement during the application process, after which a joint-decision was usually made by the teachers and members. The morality of the applicant would also be taken into consideration.

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<sup>66</sup> Wu Xinlei 2002: 269-297.

For training purposes, most societies had their own teachers or mentors, who were usually experts in music composition, instruments playing, or stage performances. Through these societies it was thus possible to preserve conventional *kunqu* techniques. Amateur singers from these organizations always gave priority to the pursuit of high-quality performances and they were more interested in preserving *kunqu* conventions than purely entertaining the audiences or even making money out of their performances. At times when they were invited to present stage works on different occasions, they always hoped to meet real fans with serious interest in *kunqu* conventions. Their unwillingness to make compromise to pure entertainment can be best shown in the following comment made by a *Xibao*<sup>67</sup> contributor named Yang Yinliu in 1926:

The *kunqu* singers (in a society) were happy to meet a real fan, but if someone did not really understand the performance, they would wish him to leave immediately... society members hated most invitations extended by entertainment gatherings, because they believed that only one or two out of every ten audiences would possibly be real *kunqu* fans. (While the rest of them) either view the performance randomly, but couldn't get the essence of the show, or they may force themselves to remain in the audience, not daring to make any noise. The time of starting and ending a performance was strictly prescribed. The limited time was not adequate for presenting a proper performance for real fans, nor was it enough for the society members themselves to have fun. Nothing could be more embarrassing than this. So, if one can shun such invitation, he should try every means to do so...<sup>68</sup>

Free from the fierce competition with other operas and newer entertainment forms, these societies didn't adopt a market-oriented or public-audience-centred strategy to maintain their development. And because of this, we can assume that they provided the very place where *kunqu* conventions could be preserved to a greater extent. With this chief goal of maintaining a high artistic standard, it is not surprising to see that a lot of conservationists were from *kunqu* societies.

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<sup>67</sup> *Xibao* is the earliest local newspaper in Wuxi, Jiangsu. It was launched in the early 1910s and ceased publication in 1937.

<sup>68</sup> Cited in Wang Tingxin 2005: 183.



Another distinctive feature of *kunqu* societies is that some of them attracted literati celebrities, intellectuals, and renowned actors who were able to facilitate scholarly research, training and public performances. With these luminaries, the influence of the societies spread into the academic world and even onto the international performing arts stage.

### 1.5. Conclusion

*Kunqu* went into decline from the late-Qing and slumped to its lowest position during the Republican era. However, the dynamic quality of this operatic genre displayed during this period should not be underestimated. In fact, it is exactly within this period that *kunqu* underwent many important changes, i.e. the main performing space shifted from the private to the public realm, performing conventions were perfected as the excerpted-scenes were fully developed as the preferred performing mode, and role-type categorizations became firmly established.

In this chapter I have tried to illustrate the dynamism of *kunqu* through some major transformations that took place despite the adverse social and cultural conditions during this period. Generally, the discussion has focused on two performing worlds – the royal court setting and the commercial setting. The Qing court ban on family *kunqu* troupes had a double-edged effect. It nearly closed the private performing space and terminated the literati patronage that had nourished *kunqu*'s early development for nearly two centuries, but at the same time, it drove *kunqu* into the public realm and paved the way for its subsequent commercial development. The court formally ordered that *kunqu* be preserved as the orthodox drama of the state, which was clearly politically motivated. *Kunqu* was not preserved

as a fossilized entity, as we see in the changes and creations that were made to allow it to fulfill its didactic role, to meet strict censorship laws, and to suit the needs of court entertainment. In the marketplace, however, professional troupes gained more autonomy to compete with popular operas on a more level playing field. Despite unfavourable conditions, these troupes actively engaged in this battle and actors started to play a key role in stage production and marketing. It was not official policies, but the audiences' preferences that set the direction for innovations and changes, such as those changes made in script revision, costuming and stage setting. This is also true with Pai Hsien-yung's *kunqu* production, as will be discussed in Chapter 3.

The Republican era witnessed great socio-political change. *Kunqu* development during this period took a trajectory vastly different from that of Peking opera, declining further and eventually facing the danger of extinction. Contributions made by the few remaining troupes, the only training school in Suzhou, and amateur societies in preserving the opera among the general public were of particular value during such a time of crisis.

The approximate 150 years that falls under my discussion here has clearly indicated that as an operatic genre, *kunqu* was continually evolving. This is particularly clear when we look at the development of acting techniques, costuming and script revision. The evolution of *kunqu* can be regarded as a manifestation of the personal choices of all those involved in this process. Yet the reasons behind such choices can only be found in the social, cultural and political changes at various historical moments. This feature will be further attested in the next chapter which focuses on *kunqu* in the second half of the twentieth century.

## CHAPTER TWO    *Kunqu* in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century

The discussion of Chinese drama is usually inseparable from the political context of the time, and this is particularly true when it comes to the 1950s and 1960s. Constantine Tung states that “no country believes more deeply in the power of drama or takes greater pains about what is in a play than does the PRC, and no drama in any country and in history has been so frequently and so directly involved and used in ideological feuds, political purges, mass campaigns and high-level power struggles as has that of the PRC” (Tung & Mackerras 1987: 1). *Kunqu* in the 1950s and 1960s was closely linked with China’s drastic social and political changes, and the innovations made in *kunqu* works that were produced during this period testify to the fact. The political undertones behind these adaptations are of great significance for our understanding of *kunqu* development in the second half of the twentieth century.

The period from the early 1950s to mid the 1960s, before the outbreak of Cultural Revolution (CR) was considered an important phase in modern Chinese drama reform.<sup>69</sup> Contrasting with its integration with the political and military actions before the founding of the PRC, the function of drama was elevated and acquired a greater role in the national political life. Therefore, the drama of this period is distinctive, if not in terms of new drama works created overall, but in terms of its manipulation as a tool for political propaganda. As a result, the simplified standards imposed during this period severely impaired the artistic merits of different

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<sup>69</sup> This refers to “xiqu gaige” initiated by the state government in 1951 that focused on the reform of traditional operatic genres throughout the country.

plays. *Kunqu*, as one of many dramatic genres, rose and fell on the political tides during this period. This trajectory shows us how traditional culture and art was handled in the drastic changes in social and political life in the early years of the PRC. Then, during the post-1978 years when political interference in art development had receded, economic reform and social transformation, together with China's increased presence on the global stage, posed a new threat to the development of traditional Chinese opera, and to *kunqu* in particular.

In chronological order, this chapter explores the trajectory of *kunqu* in the second half of the twentieth century focusing on the major turns taken during this period. Section 1 examines the brief *kunqu* revival from its deep crisis that was brought about by the PRC central government's traditional drama reform policies. *Fifteen Strings of Coins* (*Shiwu guan*), a new adaptation of a classic *kunqu* play, will be analyzed as it constitutes arguably the most representative traditional opera work that was tailor-made to suit the political situation and propagandist needs of the 1950s. Its brief national popularity can be taken as a symbol of *kunqu* revival in the early years of the PRC, and a proof of the power of political rhetoric to shape the direction of artistic creation in this particular historical period. Section 2 explores a further drastic downturn in the fortunes of *kunqu* in the early 1960s due to another round of political changes, which eventually ended with a complete halt of *kunqu* performances on the national stage. I will use the adaptation of the *kunqu* play *Li Huiniang* as a case study to illustrate the role of state policy as a dominant factor for the continued existence of *kunqu*, particularly during the build up to the Cultural Revolution (CR). Collectively, sections 1 and 2 attempt to reveal the profound impact of the coercive political atmosphere at the time on the development of *kunqu*.

Section 3 discusses the 1980s, when *kunqu*, together with other traditional operatic genres, was reinstalled onto the public stage amidst the general environment of cultural recovery during the post-CR period. It was during this time that the *kunqu* circle raised serious concerns for the protection of *kunqu* with the clear and precise aim of preserving this genre as cultural heritage. When it came to the 1990s, the accelerating social transformation and continued economic booming brought new threat to the survival and development of traditional operas, including *kunqu*. Section 4 discusses how the issue of *kunqu* preservation was dealt with in this rapidly changing socio-cultural context.

## **2.1. The Traditional Drama Reform and *Fifteen Strings of Coins*: 1950s**

With the founding of the PRC in 1949, a new chapter began in modern *kunqu* history. For the first time *kunqu* singers gained the stature of being the “people’s artists,” which marked a profound elevation from the bottom of the social hierarchical system of pre-modern times and the Republican era.<sup>70</sup> A complete change of the entire drama world also took place. In this section, I will first provide a brief overview of the traditional drama reform campaign (*xiqu gaige*) of the 1950s that shaped the environment for a brief revival of *kunqu*. I will then discuss the nationally celebrated adaptation of the classic play *Fifteen Strings of Coins* in 1956, which is generally taken by the mainstream Chinese dramatists as a symbol of this revival.<sup>71</sup> With this case study I intend to show that the general political atmosphere and the state’s cultural policies during this decade exerted an overwhelmingly

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<sup>70</sup> Zhou Chuanying, one of the most renowned *kunqu* masters in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, remembers the social status change of opera performers after the founding of PRC. See Zhou Chuanying 1988: 97-104. See also Sang Yuxi 2010: 279.

<sup>71</sup> For example, see Wu Xinlei 2005: 237-243; Zhou Qin 2004: 271-273.

dominant influence on *kunqu* development, and determined what would be preserved and what would change.

China's traditional drama reform campaign of the 1950s was a major move to realize the goal of reforming a new socialist culture, although reform of old plays in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)-controlled regions during the late 1930s and 1940s had already laid the foundations for this post-1949 reform campaign.<sup>72</sup> The main reason for continuing with this drama reform is that the political function of drama was still very much valued. Actually, before 1949, the CCP had been well aware of the mass appeal of traditional drama and had adopted it as a potent tool for propaganda and mass education. In his famous "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art", Mao Zedong pointed out that drama is "an ideal instrument for educating the masses in proletarian philosophy and raising their cultural level" (Mao cited in Franklin Houn 1959: 225). To fulfil this role, drama needed to undergo necessary reform in both its content and its form of performance.

"Letting a hundred flowers bloom" is the most important slogan to be upheld in the drama reforms of the 1950s, was formally initiated by Tian Han, the then Chairman of the Chinese Dramatists' Association, on the First National Drama Work Conference in 1950. He says, "...apart from continuing with Peking opera reform, we should put emphasis on the reform of local dramas...in an effort to realize the 'hundred-flower blooming' of all different kinds of drama arts" (Tian cited in Shang Changbao 2007: 66). Yet it was only when Mao Zedong actually wrote down the slogan "Let a hundred flowers bloom; weed through the old and bring forth the new" (*baihua xifang, tuichen chuxin*),<sup>73</sup> in March 1951 for the founding of the Traditional

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<sup>72</sup> For a description of drama reforms in 1930s and 1940s, see for example Liu Yilun 2007.

<sup>73</sup> Although the first half of this slogan, i.e. "let a hundred flowers bloom" was adopted for the 1956 Hundred

Opera Academy of China, that this slogan became firmly established as the guiding principle for drama reform that would exert “unrivalled influence” on drama development in the early years of the PRC (Fu Jin 2002a: 11). According to the first half of this slogan (*baihua qifang*), the development of dramas of all different genres was to be encouraged, whereas the second half (*tuichen chuxin*) specifies the government’s attitudes towards tradition. Mao Zedong once elaborated on the precise meaning of “*tuichen chuxin*”,

... ‘*chen*’ means old; all things from the past are old, and they are the so-called traditions, among which there are both essence and dross, so we see the need to reform. ‘*tui*’ can be understood as ‘drop’ and ‘topple,’ or ‘advocate’ and ‘push forward.’ All feudal dross needs to be discarded and toppled.<sup>74</sup>

Here, “traditions” in drama were defined as old things from the past, and all those unwanted “feudal” elements needed to be rooted out. Mao saw the absolute need for reform. The initiation of this slogan was reflected in a government document when on 5 May 1951, the State Administrative Council issued the “Directive on Drama Reform” which sanctioned a three-pronged policy for the reform of drama repertoire, artists and organization (*gaixi, gairen, gaizhi*). The opening paragraph read,

The people’s drama is an important tool for the education of the general public based on democracy and patriotism. Our country is profoundly rich in drama heritage, which has a close connection with our people. It is absolutely necessary to inherit this heritage, and develop it. However, much of this heritage has been used by the feudal ruling class as a weapon to harm the people, so we must make a discreet choice among them. Only after being reformed and developed can it work for the interest of the people.<sup>75</sup>

The six articles of this directive laid out a list of ‘must’ and ‘mustn’t dos’, so that a general direction was marked out for large-scale drama reforms throughout the

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Flower Movement which aimed at dealing with the intellectuals’ criticism on the CCP, it referred to drama issues specifically here.

<sup>74</sup> Mao Zedong offered this detailed explanation in June 1949 to Zhou Yang, Tian Han and Mao Shaobo, who were about to be charged with the task of organizing the nation-wide drama reform campaign in the 1950s. See Ma Shaobo 2008: 7.

<sup>75</sup> For a full text of this directive, see “Guanyu xiqu gaige gongzuo de zhishi”, *Shandong Zhengbao*, May 1951.

country. However, as Liu Siyuan points out, while this directive “provided broad principles concerning play banning, examination, and revision, it was short of specific standards for action, which resulted not only in ambiguity between central and local cultural authorities over the criteria and procedure of banning plays, but also extensive repertoire attrition in some regions.” (Liu Siyuan 2009: 389) The state eventually realised the seriousness of the problem of repertoire shortage, and relaxed its censorship in 1956-57.

The impact of the state’s traditional drama reform in these years on *kunqu* development was obvious and profound. On the one hand, *kunqu* singers who had previously been forced to quit the profession during the Republican era were able to resume work after being reemployed by artistic institutions in different parts of the country. On the other hand, the extent to which *kunqu* could develop was totally subject to the overall drama reform policies. Due to the strict censorship on play scripts, very few new works of high quality were produced in the first half of the 1950s.<sup>76</sup> As a ‘local’ drama genre teetering on the brink of extinction in the previous decades, *kunqu* did not draw much attention from the general public until 1956 when the new adaptation of *Fifteen Strings of Coins* rose instantly to fame riding on the back of a government endorsement where it was widely publicized as a model production during the drama reform campaign. In fact, the phenomenal popularity of this adaptation, as Liu Siyuan (2009: 402) observes, is “the best illustration of the dire shortage of plays for the traditional drama stage.”

In 1955, Huang Yuan, then Assistant Director of the Propaganda Department of Zhejiang province and Head of the Cultural Bureau of Zhejiang, was requested by

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<sup>76</sup> For more details about *kunqu* in the first half of 1950s, see Zhongguo de kunquyishu 2005: 234-235; Song Bo 2005: 237-239.



the provincial government to prepare a *kunqu* production to visit Beijing. To fulfil this task, Huang tried to decide what play would be both politically viable and artistically qualified. In November of this year, Huang watched the classical version of *Fifteen Strings of Coins* staged by the Zhejiang Kunqu Troupe in a dilapidated and sparsely-attended local theatre. Written by a Qing-dynasty playwright, this play is a piece of classical *kunqu* work. The original story in this play depicted the miscarriage of justice concerning the Xiong brothers – one of them is falsely accused of poisoning his neighbour's son, and the other framed of robbing fifteen strings of coins from a gambler, so both are sentenced to death. Then, the newly appointed district magistrate has a dream about this injustice, and tries the cases again and finally justice is restored.

Huang Yuan noticed that this play had a plot similar to that of a tale titled “Yanzhi,” taken from the famous Qing short story collection *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (*Liaozhai zhiyi*), which was also about a miscarriage of justice and was suggested by Mao Zedong as required reading for officials at the time. The triumph of the realistic practice in a law case judgment fit perfectly with the political needs of the time when the CCP was trying to halt the campaign to clear out counter-revolutionaries that was initiated in 1955 but had gradually grown out of control. Huang decided to adapt this play for his task.<sup>77</sup> With a team led by himself to work on this plan, Huang had spent about a month on working out the abridged and revised script and another one month or so on finishing rehearsals before the play finally premiered in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Huang Yuan explained how he had made this decision in his memoir. See Huang Yuan 1995: 9.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid: 9-10.

Below is an overview of the major changes and innovations made in Huang's adaptation, which clearly demonstrate the decisive power of political consideration throughout the entire process of adapting this work. Firstly, the content of the story underwent considerable alteration. There were two major storylines in the original 26-scene script, but in order to reduce the complexity and focus on the theatrical conflict between the upright judge, his incompetent corrupt counterpart, and the sly criminal, only one storyline was taken. The new adaptation contains 8 scenes only. A few signature scenes that embodied the best acting skills in this classical play were omitted simply because they belong with the other story line and contained additional "unwanted superstitious elements." The central theme of this new work was set as "objectivism versus subjectivism" and "combating subjectivism and bureaucracy," which had strong political allusions to the handling of injustices during the social campaign at the time (Huang Yuan 1995: 10).

The portrayal of supporting characters also helps us uncover the political undertone in Huang's adaptation. Instead of portraying them in their original identities as "scholar and beauty" (*caizi jiaren*), a prototypical *kunqu* design, the young protagonists Xiong Youlan and Su Rongjuan were portrayed as coming from impoverished lower-class families under feudal oppression. Liu Yilun (2009: 80) points out that this change effectively "reduced the literati flavour" of this play and helped it to gain popular support from the general public. The new adaptation also omitted the depiction of fatalism and karma that was deemed "harmful" during the drama reform.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Huang Yuan saw it as an absolute necessity to discard such superstitious "dross". See Huang Yuan 1995: 10. Recently, Taiwan scholar Wang Shiwei has published a detailed study on the structural alteration of this play. See Wang Shiwei 2009.

Secondly, significant changes were also made to lyrics and music. To meet the needs of the plot change, many original lyrics were changed and new lines added. These lyrical alterations were quoted by Huang Yuan as the reason for music revision. Huang and his team chose not to obey the *kunqu* “labelled melody” (*qupai*) during the revision. In fact, in order to defend the change, some dramatists even declared that the “labelled melody” system was “an obstacle for *kunqu*’s further development” and “the very reason for the general audiences’ alienation from *kunqu*.”<sup>80</sup> On the other hand, the rigid rules of the “labelled melody” system for the composition of lyrics were also ignored, and some new lines were composed.

During the adaptation process, both aural and visual aspects, or the pursuit of artistic quality, gave way to the narrative content, or ideological meaning, of the work. Behind this choice lies the pursuit of political safety of the play to ensure its performability. In 1996, the dramatist Gu Linsen published a paper for the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Fifteen*’s production in which he terms the play’s presentation of *kunqu* art as a type of “non-rigid inheritance” (*feichuncui jicheng*) (Gu Linsen 1996: 46), by which he meant that considerable changes and alterations were made in the play’s structure, lyrics and music, and re-moulding of the leading characters. Gu asserts that *Fifteen* “marked a milestone in modern *kunqu* history”<sup>81</sup> because it offered a new experience in the inheritance of traditional drama during socialist times, and it “set a good example of finding a balance between artistic tradition on the one hand and the spirit of the modern times on the other” (Gu Linsen 1996: 49).

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<sup>80</sup> Drama musician He Wei made this remark, see “Baihua qifang, tuichen chuxin de bangyang”, *Xijubao*, June, 1956: 15-16.

<sup>81</sup> This “milestone” should not be taken as the start point of *kunqu* revival in modern times. As Fu Jin warns, the significance of *Fifteen* should not be over-exaggerated, and its success is actually resulted from *kunqu* recovery during the first half of 1950s. See Fu Jin 2006: 75.

Actually, negative reviews of this adaptation work, particularly on such aspects as plot restructuring and lyrics, were also published before the play toured Beijing, although these contending voices did not draw much public attention. For example, an article entitled “A few suggestions on the revised script of *Fifteen Strings of Coins*” (*Dui Shiwu guan zhengli ben de yixie yijian*) appeared in a local newspaper *Hangzhou Daily* on 13 January 1956 in which the author, Liu Ling, squarely criticised the vernacularization of the play’s lyrics and the poor quality of some musical sections. Chen Jing, who was responsible for lyrical revisions, admitted that in retrospect, he could not believe he had written such ludicrous plots back then so as “to suit the mass line” (Chen cited in Fu Jin 2006: 73-74). Yet despite all these perceived defects and criticism, *Fifteen* found favour with the top leaders, and its political safety helped it rocket to great heights of popularity. In order to fit this adaptation work into our discussion in this dissertation, we need to note that the innovation involved in this work was political in nature and mostly in terms of the content of the play, so that this work was turned into a revolutionized propaganda production. This innovation reveals the political needs of this particular historical period, and it forms a stark contrast to the innovation of the more recent examples, including Pai’s *Peony*, which focused on visual aspect rather than the play’s content – we will examine these cases in the subsequent chapters.

After touring Jiangsu, Shanghai and Zhejiang, Huang’s *Fifteen* was taken to Beijing in April 1956. Mao Zedong came to the show on 17 April and was very pleased with the play’s adaptation and performance. He proposed that the troupe be rewarded, and recommended that the play be adapted into other drama genres. On 18 May, an editorial entitled “About ‘A single play has saved an operatic form’”

(*Guanyu 'yichu xi jiu huo le yige juzhong'*),<sup>82</sup> by Tian Han, was published in *Renrin Ribao*. Premier Zhou Enlai watched the play twice and also expressed his compliments towards it on different occasions, one of which was at the special forum on *Fifteen Strings of Coins* held by the Ministry of Culture and China Dramatists' Association on 17 May 1956. At the end of this conference, Zhou concluded that this play was highly suitable for the general public, and that it was of great ideological and artistic significance. He pointed out that its merits existed not just in injecting new energy into the traditional genre of *kunqu*, but also in demonstrating that historical plays were just as viable for educating modern audiences. Zhou also suggested that this play had set a very good example of further implementation of the guidelines of "letting a hundred flowers bloom" during the drama reform period.<sup>83</sup> Later, Sen Yanbing, the Minister of Culture, pointed out at the National Cultural Workers' Conference that this play had set a very good example of carrying out the party's slogan of "weeding through the old and bringing forth the new" (Huang Yuan 1995: 13). Around the same time, the Ministry of Culture issued a notice to different local governments suggesting that "all operas and troupes throughout China shall try their best to adapt this excellent play, and all cultural bureaus shall help solve any problems during this process" (in Song Bo 2005: 240). This endorsement and approval from the top leaders and the Ministry of Culture quickly established *Fifteen* as a model stage production. In Beijing alone, from 10 April to 27 May 1956, this play was performed 46 times, and the total audience number amounted to over 70,000. *Fifteen* soon became a household name in the capital city and by the end of 1956, more than 1,000 opera troupes throughout the country had mounted their own

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<sup>82</sup> For the full text of this editorial, see Wu Xinlei 2005: 238-240.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid: 237; also "Baihuaqifang, tuichenchuxin de bangyang", *Xijiu bao*, June, 1956.

adaptations of the play.<sup>84</sup> Then why did this play received the active promotion from the government and top leaders? The answer may be found in the broader cultural and art context of the time: in the early PRC years, the newly founded regime was trying to promote new socialist revolutionary art; the traditional art forms were quite popular with the general public while there weren't much else available, the government saw the traditional forms would serve to solve this issue.

This level of fame enjoyed by *Fifteen* reveals that during the mid-1950s, the political safety and social effect of a play came to override its artistic merits and become the most important criterion for its success. Similarly, what was stressed during its publicity was also the content of the play rather than the overall performance and the intrinsic aesthetic values of the operatic form. The influence of this play was felt both within the *kunqu* circle and throughout the entire Chinese drama world. Wu Xinlei (2005: 236) asserts that the success of this play shattered the stereotypical attitude that *kunqu* was an “aristocratic” art, as its success had proved its popularity with the general public (*renminxing*). The editorial in the 18 May 1956 edition of *People's Daily* also severely criticised the view that “*kunqu* is condemned to become extinct”, and warned that from the wide dissemination of *Fifteen*, all personnel in charge of drama reform should reflect upon the question as to whether any other local drama genres have been stifled when “a hundred flowers are blooming.” (Wu Xinlei 2005: 239-240).

The popularization of *Fifteen* benefited not just *kunqu*, but many other local drama genres and the construction of their repertoire. The *kunqu* workers' morale was hugely boosted, and within the next few years, professional *kunqu* troupes were

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<sup>84</sup> See Fu Jin 2002b: 46. In Zhou Chuanying's memoir, there is a separate article about *Fifteen*'s performances in Beijing in 1956, see Zhou Chuanying 1988: 105-110. Zhou was the leading singer in this stage work, his recount offers some authoritative details for this case.

established in Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Hunan, Shanghai and Beijing, and training schools and classes started to enrol a new generation of students. In addition, a couple of amateur *kunqu* societies were established throughout the country.<sup>85</sup> The success of this particular play also greatly encouraged a wave of traditional *kunqu* play restoration. Yet the key point is that all of these works, whether adapted from classical plays or newly written on historical themes, strictly followed the example of *Fifteen* in terms of literary structure, musical style, and above all, the way in which they echoed the political discourse of the time (Ke Fan 2008: 30-32).

*Fifteen's* influence was felt way beyond the *kunqu* circle and it started a nation-wide reconsideration about the possibility of digging out the classical plays' hidden ideological themes for contemporary times. Just one month after *Fifteen's* Beijing tour, the First National Drama Repertoire Work Conference was held by the Ministry of Culture in June 1956 to tackle the problem of the shortage of traditional plays on the theatrical stage. As a result, all drama workers throughout the country were encouraged to explore the traditional drama heritage (Fu Jin 2006: 77).

This ease of repertoire censorship and focus on the revival of traditional opera brought about by the success of *Fifteen* did not last long before drama development took a new direction – again under the influence of mass campaigns initiated by the state. During the Anti-Rightist Movement that started in July 1957, many outspoken artists were accused of being “rightists” and punished.<sup>86</sup>

In 1958, the start of the Great Leap Forward campaign required a particular ideological support from the art and literary field. The Ministry of Culture issued a

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<sup>85</sup> For example, in 1956, the Beijing *Kunqu* Research Society was launched by the famous scholar Yu Pingbo; in 1957, the Shanghai *Kunqu* Research Society was established by Zhao Jingshen. See Wu Xinlei 2005: 241-242.

<sup>86</sup> For more details on the new turn in drama development after 1957, see for instance Liu Siyuan 2009: 404.

notice titled “On greatly promoting cultural creation” (*Guanyu dali fanrong chuanguo de tongzhi*) in 1958, which read,

... [our] great socialist revolution and socialist construction high tide is calling for a large scale socialist cultural high tide that can suit our needs. We urgently need newly created artistic works that reflect our current changes and that of the recent ten years, and works that laud the heroic conduct of our great socialist constructors... (in Zhang Li 2007: 98).

This initiative sent out a clear signal that contemporary-themed plays should now take the lead in drama development. Emphasis was swiftly turned to the promotion of modern plays that reflected contemporary revolutionary life, while the development of classical plays was almost completely halted. To rectify this deviation, Zhou Enlai advocated to drama professionals in early 1959 that art development should “walk on two legs” (*liangtiaotui zoulu*), i.e., to develop both classical and contemporary-themed plays. Within only one year, this slogan was modified to “simultaneously develop all three” (*sanzhe bingju*), i.e., to develop contemporary-themed plays, classical plays and newly revised historical plays simultaneously.<sup>87</sup> Under such circumstances, between 1958 and the early 1960s, a number of modern *kunqu* plays were created, which served as a response to the advocacy of “drama serves politics”.<sup>88</sup> The themes of all these plays can be broadly summed up as follows: public support for party leadership and enthusiasm for socialist revolution and construction; collectivism and patriotism.

## 2.2. The New Adaptation of *Li Huiniang* and Sudden Suppression: 1960s

The first half of the 1960s saw another round of swinging back and forth of the political pendulum. Firstly, in 1960, disruptive political interference in literature and

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<sup>87</sup> Ma Yanxiang offered a detailed account about why and how this initiation was formed. See Ma Yanxiang 1996.

<sup>88</sup> For a list of these modern *kunqu* plays, see Ke Fan 2008: 75-77.



drama receded as the CCP reflected upon the disaster caused by the Great Leap Forward campaign.<sup>89</sup> Yet this thaw did not last long before “class struggle” was advocated and drama development was once again disrupted by the political climate. In September 1962, at the tenth plenary of the eighth Central Committee of the CCP, Mao Zedong emphasized that the government should “... never forget class struggle...” and that “...[class struggle] should be carried out in the ideological field as well,” which is generally regarded as an attempt by Mao to regain the power he had lost three years earlier.<sup>90</sup> Under this instruction, the political climate froze again, and in the drama world, all western plays and historical plays were prohibited, while contemporary-themed plays were promoted. It was under such circumstances that Meng Chao’s *Li Huiniang* was produced and staged.

In the winter of 1959, Meng Chao, a drama writer and critic, wrote his *kunqu* play *Li Huiniang* by adapting a Ming dynasty classic entitled *The Story of Red Plum Blossom* (*Hongmei ji*). Meng’s play text appeared in volumes 7 and 8 in *Drama Scripts* (*Juben*), one of the major drama journals at the time, in the summer of 1961 and was later published in May 1962 by the People’s Literature Publishing House.

In general, Meng’s *Li Huiniang* was revised in a similar manner to Huang Yuan’s *Fifteen Strings of Coins*. Compared to the Ming script, major changes were made in the structure of the story with only one of the two storylines being adopted. *Li Huiniang* is a minor character in the original text.<sup>91</sup> She is the concubine of Jia Sidao, the Prime Minister of the Southern Song dynasty, who indulges in debauchery while the Yuan army’s attack threatens the rule of the weak dynasty. *Li Huiniang* is

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<sup>89</sup> For a detailed account of the class struggle during late 1950s and early 1960s, see for example Jonathan Spence 1999: 544-564.

<sup>90</sup> A brief account of the political changes in this few years can be found at Tung & Mackerras 1987: 7-12.

<sup>91</sup> Yet Meng Chao’s play is not the first adaptation to portray *Li Huiniang* as the leading character. The original Ming script had been adapted by many regional operatic genres, and *Li Huiniang* was invariably depicted as the central character. See Wang Peiyuan 2007: 45.

killed by Jia after she expresses her admiration for an upright scholar, Pei Yu (or Pei Shunqing), who openly denounces Jia for his corruption. Later on, Li's ghost then saves Pei, who is held in detention by Jia for his verbal accusation, and bravely charges against Jia at court.

In the newly-composed introductory aria, Meng wrote,

...Drawing on the insights of the forefathers,  
I lay down my own opinions.  
To the old play *Hongmei* I have given a new turn.  
Having studied the tender feelings of young lovers and personal resentment [as described in the old play]  
I write about flourishing dreams being cut off  
Write about northern horse neighing at the banks of the Qiantang  
Jia Sidao harms the state and hurts the people; there's playing and singing at nightly banquets,  
In his laughter is hidden the dagger, and occasion for murder comes;  
Pei Shunqing, groaning with anger, speaks straight words and meets his ruin;  
Satisfying people's minds, extending righteous justice,  
Li Huiniang's heroic spirit avenges injustice after her death.<sup>92</sup>

What Meng calls "a new turn" in his adaptation is the change of theme: in the original text, the romance between Li Huiniang and Pei Yu is the most important topic, whereas in Meng's new text, the conflict between Jia and Li and that between Jia and Pei take centre stage. Meng explains in the epilogue that Li Huiniang is such a righteous and brave character that she is worthy of admiration not just because of her revenge, but more importantly for her denunciation of the villain in power and her search for justice for all the suffering classes.<sup>93</sup> It is Li's righteousness and bravery that Meng valued in this work; a work that became possible only as a result of the temporary relaxation of PRC's drama censorship laws. Ironically, however, it

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<sup>92</sup> This English translation is quoted from Rudolf Wagner 1990: 306. For the Chinese version of this aria, see Wang Peiyuan 2007: 44.

<sup>93</sup> See Mu Xin 1995: 157.

was these exact same qualities of righteousness and bravery that were to bring the play under severe political attack in just two years' time.<sup>94</sup>

With this alteration to the theme, changes in lyrics became a necessity. Some lyrics in Meng's text were taken from the original Ming script, while the rest were newly written. The performing aspect, on the contrary, followed conventional *kunqu* techniques quite faithfully.<sup>95</sup> Under the directorship of Bai Yunsheng (1902-1972), director of the Northern *Kunqu* Troupe, the play was put into production by his troupe. All three leading cast members were professional *kunqu* singers from this troupe and they designed their acting and singing by strictly following *kunqu* conventions. But the music featured some innovations: Cong Zhaohuan (2007: 55) estimates that "about one third followed the original music notations without any change, one third was revised, and the remaining one third was newly composed."

After two months of rehearsals, the play premiered in August 1961 in Beijing. It turned out to be an instant success with the local audiences. Dramatists and critics also offered their plaudits and mainstream newspapers such as the *Guangming Daily* and the *People's Daily* carried favourable comments, dubbing it as another piece of good work under the principle of "weeding through the old and bring forth the new" (Cong Zhaohuan 2007). On 31 August 1961, an article entitled "Harmless Ghost" (*yougui wuhai lun*) was published in the *Beijing Wanbao*, hailing the play as "a rare and valuable piece of literary work with a good theme and neat structure" (Mu Xin 1995: 197). With regard to the general public's opinion about ghosts in the play, the author argued that rather than being taken as a sign of superstition, this character of

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<sup>94</sup> Rudolf Wagner explored the political allusions of Meng's text by comparing it against another few historical plays made in the 1950s and 1960s. See Wagner 1990: 306-312.

<sup>95</sup> Cong Zhaohuan, the male lead singer in this *kunqu* work, recalls the production of this play in detail, see Cong Zhaohuan 2007: 54-55.

Li Huiniang should be perceived as “a member of the society and an exemplary female image with unyielding spirit against oppression within the social struggle” (Mu Xin 1995: 197).

However, as the political climate grew tense again after Mao’s 1962 class-struggle narrative, critical reception of Meng Chao’s *Li Huiniang* began to alternate between absolute praise and absolute denouncement. After 1963, all major newspapers started to attack the play severely, labelling it as a “poisonous weed” (*ducao*). The main reasons for this were that, as a ghost play, it had promoted feudal superstition; and it had been used as a tool to launch a severe attack against the Party<sup>96</sup> (Mu Xin 1995: 160). As a direct result, the play was listed as a typical example in a request issued by the Ministry of Culture to ban all ghost plays throughout China. The CCP’s Propaganda Department also issued a directive on 17 March 1963 to have all ghost plays banned. On 6 and 7 May, one of the major newspapers in Shanghai, *Wenhuibao*, carried a long article entitled “About ‘Harmless Ghost’” (*‘You guiwuhai’ lun*), which bluntly pointed out that the play alluded to the CCP and that the play had failed to absorb the essence of the original script, but had succeeded in achieving the exact opposite – developing feudal dross. Immediately after this, criticism against the play intensified.<sup>97</sup>

At the Learning Festival of Peking Opera on Contemporary Themes in Beijing in June 1964, Kang Sheng<sup>98</sup> openly condemned *Li Huiniang* as a typical example of “bad plays” (*huaixi*), asserting that both Meng Chao and supporters of his play had

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<sup>96</sup> This kind of strained interpretation was also used when another two pieces of “poisonous weed” plays *Xie Yaohuan* and *Hairui baguan* were criticised, showing how deeply power struggle had penetrated into the literary and art field at that time.

<sup>97</sup> See Mu Xin 1995: 161.

<sup>98</sup> Kang Sheng was a devotee of *kunqu*, and a big fan of ghost plays. He had offered much help in the writing and production of this play, yet it is also him who openly denounced this play as “anti-Party, and anti-socialist.” See Wagner 1990: 54; 307.

intended to overturn the proletariat dictatorship and that the play should thus be classified as class struggle and severely criticized. Then on 1 March 1965, the play was blatantly labelled as “a piece of anti-Party, anti-socialist weed” in the *People’s Daily* (Song Bo 2005: 243). With this fuel, the seriousness of the problem was no longer just about a ghost play, but, rather, it was about reactionary activity and political class-struggle.

In fact, the open criticism on this play was by no means the end of the issue. Its disastrous impact on *kunqu* development can be seen in both the individuals’ suffering and the subsequent ill fate of *kunqu* institutions at large. Once the Cultural Revolution had started, all those involved with *Li Huiniang*, including the director, author, staff responsible for publicity, reviewers and critics who had previously praised it, even those who simply supported ghost plays, were persecuted. According to Cong Zhaohuan, a total of around 100 people were persecuted during the Cultural Revolution simply because of their involvement with this play.<sup>99</sup> The Northern Kunqu Troupe was forced to downsize its staff from 300 to about 70 in 1965 and the remaining staff members were later sent to the countryside to perform contemporary-themed plays. In February 1966, the troupe was forced to disband, followed very quickly by the disbanding of all other *kunqu* troupes in Zhejiang, Jiangsu, Hunan, and Shanghai. It was only towards the end of 1970s that these troupes gained their new life. *Kunqu* was subject to a total ban from the Chinese drama stage during the Cultural Revolution when all Chinese around the country watched only eight revolutionary model plays (*gemingyangban xi*)”.

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<sup>99</sup> For an account of the persecution suffered by these artists and dramatists, see Cong Zhaohuan 2007, and Mu Xin 1995.

To understand the inheritance of *kunqu* traditions during the 1950s and early 1960s, it is important to note that while the major task for all *kunqu* troupes was to mount revised classic plays and newly-written contemporary-themed plays, some time-honoured signature excerpted-scene plays were also staged and taught to a new generation of singers. Particularly between late 1959 and 1963, when the impact of the Great Leap Forward campaign on the drama world waned and artists started to seek inspiration from traditional works, a favourable climate was created for the revival of *kunqu* classical works, including a number of excerpted-scenes that had remained popular since Qing times. *Kunqu* bases such as Shanghai, Jiangsu and Zhejiang made great contributions in the restoration of some classical plays and signature scenes. A new generation of young students underwent strict training courtesy of the “chuan” generation singers who had grown up in the famous Suzhou *Kunqu* Training School in the 1920s.<sup>100</sup> Ye Changhai and Liu Qing (2004)’s portrayal of the 1960s Shanghai *kunqu* training class offers us a rare and valuable opportunity to see how *kunqu* conventions were passed down through arduous training in those early PRC years.

As we have seen in this section, during the 1960s and 1970s, the downfall and total banning of *kunqu* from the Chinese stage revealed how the government dealt with traditional art forms. As in the 1950s, it was the content of plays that determined the fate of the entire genre, yet this time, what it brought about was a disastrous effect. Amidst the country’s rapidly changing political atmosphere, the government denounced and then eradicated *kunqu* because of its “feudal dross” and the play’s reactionary content. It was considered completely unsuitable for the country’s

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<sup>100</sup> See Ke Fan 2008: 34-36.

socialist revolutionary art development, the task of which would be fulfilled by a newly development genre – the revolutionary opera. It was not until after the end of the Cultural Revolution that the political climate was loosened and *kunqu* and other traditional operas were allowed to recover and develop.

### **2.3. *Kunqu* in the 1980s: a Brief Recovery**

Two years after the end of the Cultural Revolution, the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the CCP was convened in late 1978 in Beijing. It declared that all emphasis for the country's development be put on the 'Four Modernizations' in industry, agriculture, science and technology, and national defence. Subsequently, a series of significant, all-encompassing changes took place within China, relating to politics, economics, and social life. It was against this backdrop of great socio-political changes, where the PRC was making every effort to get everything back to normal, that the drama world took on a completely new look. This section examines *kunqu* development in the 1980s, which some scholars view as the second revival in the post-1949 era.<sup>101</sup>

The early half of the 1980s was indeed a period of recovery for Chinese drama. Based on the statistics he collected during his visit to China, Daniel Yang observes that Chinese drama in 1980, 1981 and 1982 was thriving (Tung & Mackerras 1987: 166). Within only two years between 1979 and 1980, with the consent of the state, the drama policies of the 1950s and 1960s were resumed, effectively ending the dominance of revolutionary model plays in the Chinese drama world of the Cultural Revolution. At the Fourth National Literary and Art Workers' Conference held in

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<sup>101</sup> For instance, see Ke Fan 2008: 39.

October 1979, Deng Xiaoping reiterated that the policies of “letting a hundred flowers bloom; letting a hundred schools of thought contend” and “weeding through the old to bring forth the new” should be maintained (Ke Fan 2008: 38). A series of major questions were brought forward for reconsideration, such as how to balance between the arts and politics, and how historical plays could be adapted to reflect contemporary social values. Apart from this meeting, several other conferences were also held to discuss drama development. In November 1979, at the Third Congress of the China Dramatists’ Association, the senior dramatist Zhang Geng stressed that the “simultaneously develop the three” (*sanzhe bingju*) policy should be maintained as a guiding principle for drama development for a new age. Then, on a forum concerning the construction of the traditional drama repertoire held in Beijing in July 1980, drama workers also reached a consensus about the importance of the “hundred flowers”, “walking on two legs” and “simultaneously develop all three” policies. They also worked out a standard for rescuing and developing traditional plays.<sup>102</sup> After all these meetings, a favourable environment was created for the revival of *kunqu*.

The very first sign of *kunqu* revitalization in the late 1970s and early 1980s was the re-establishment of professional institutions. Within the four years or so after the end of the Cultural Revolution, all six professional *kunqu* troupes reformed. Yet a lack of professional staff for these troupes became an acute issue since, by then, many senior *kunqu* masters had either passed away or been too old to perform, while some of the younger singers trained before the Cultural Revolution had changed profession. The seriousness of the situation caught the attention of the state and in

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid: 38-39.



1982, the Ministry of Culture issued a special policy to direct *kunqu* work which required exponents of *kunqu* “to rescue, inherit, reform, and develop” (*qiangjiu, jicheng, gexin, fazhan*) the genre. The wording of this policy suggests that the government put more stress on the rescue and inheritance of the opera in the first place.

Since the early 1980s, dramatists and intellectuals have raised the alarm about the ‘traditional drama crisis.’ As one of the earliest voices in this extended discussion on this topic, Fei Bingxun (1981: 36-38) claimed that the real reason behind this crisis was politics – the disruption of drama development and audience cultivation caused by the Cultural Revolution. During the following years, discussants started to examine the issue from within the drama field itself. Many of them looked at external reasons such as the popularity of new entertainment forms and the ageing and alienation of audiences, while others focused on the innate features of these art forms. They warned that the most serious problems included the rigidity of the traditional drama performing system (Yang Leiming 1988: 60-61; Shen Yao 1985: 9; Hao Zhaoqing 1984: 12), the lack of new additions to the repertoire, particularly works catering for new audiences’ modern tastes (Yang Leiming 1988: 61; Liu Yongzheng 1984: 15), most drama actors’ innate conservatism (Hao Zhaoqing 1984: 12), and bureaucratic interference in drama creation and critical work (Liu Yongzheng 1984: 15).

As Hao Zhaoqing (1984: 10) points out, *kunqu* was facing the most acute problem during this crisis. It is in this critical context that many dramatists and theatre practitioners joined the discussion about how *kunqu* should survive this crisis. As early as 1981, Cai Zhengren, one of the key singers on the post-1978 *kunqu* stage

who had grown up in the 1960s, vigorously warned that the overall situation for *kunqu* development was rather appalling even though the state's art policies were generally favourable. His concerns stemmed from a belief that since *kunqu*'s audience base had diminished to an alarmingly low level, it was urgent to bring *kunqu* up to date with the modern times. His suggestions included producing new works, training new singers, reforming the music system, and putting more emphasis on publicity. He also stressed the importance of maintaining the balance between the inheritance of convention and the promotion of innovation (Cai Zhengren 1981: 47). It is interesting to note that twenty years later, Pai Hsien-yung proposed a strategy for *kunqu* preservation which bears a striking resemblance to Cai's view.

In fact, many observations point to the same problems of a dwindling audience base (especially the lack of young audiences) and a shortage of young actors, which resulted from the suspension of *kunqu* training and performance during the Cultural Revolution.<sup>103</sup> The predicament *kunqu* found itself in is best revealed in the following descriptions. The Deputy Director of the Suzhou *Kunqu* Troupe, Wang Fang, recalls that between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s,

...traditional drama was in its worst slump. A lot of my generation left this circle – opting to take other jobs. Nobody wanted to watch traditional drama...In the end, the number of audiences was even smaller than the number of actors (Zhou Bing & Jiang Wenbo 2009: 104).

Awarded with the Chinese traditional drama “Oscar”, the Plum Award, yet still without adequate opportunity to perform, Lin Weilin<sup>104</sup> paints a similar picture: “Only about ten students among the sixty in my class stayed in the *kunqu* circles...” (Zhou Bing & Jiang Wenbo 2009: 104).

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<sup>103</sup> For example, see Li Taicheng 1982.

<sup>104</sup> Now in his late 40s, Lin Weilin is one of the best martial *kunqu* actors on today's stage. See Zhongguo de kunquyishu 2005: 254.

Facing such a predicament, dramatists and *kunqu* professionals eagerly sought solutions to the problems. The renowned dramatist Zhang Geng points out that as *kunqu* represents all Chinese drama traditions, the preservation of *kunqu* art is “a task shared by all operatic genres in China...” Zhang firmly believes that the essence of *kunqu* art can survive through the performing practices of all different genres. As for the conservation and development of *kunqu*, he displays a fairly progressive attitude, acknowledging the absolute necessity of reform and innovation in order to keep *kunqu* viable in the new society. He even encourages all kinds of experimental productions, since “only through trial and error one can find the best way to develop *kunqu*” (Zhang Geng 1982).

If this pro-innovation attitude can be taken to be representative of the stance taken by drama theorists and scholars, the following quote clearly echoes this view among *kunqu* artists. The “*chuan*” generation masters who were invited to train young actors in the 1980s always reminded their students that,

Some of our performances have undergone repeated revisions during our stage practices, so why were we allowed to revise, but not you?... You should not treat what we teach you as ‘antique’, or anything sacred. Our performances were created through stage practice by absorbing techniques from other genres, so they were nothing like unchanged plays from our ancestors. (Chen Depu 1983: 34)

This quote offers us some crucial information in attempting to understand the interactions between tradition and innovation. These master actors belonging to the “*chuan*” generation were treated as the sole bearers of the *kunqu* artistic lineage throughout the Republican era and their performances were generally considered the most authoritative reference. Yet paradoxically, what they possessed and what they had to offer was something that had gone through great change and evolution.

In 1984, Yu Zhenfei, one of the greatest *kunqu* singers in the twentieth century, wrote a letter to Hu Yaobang, the then General Secretary of the CCP, appealing to

the central government for immediate action in tackling the problems that threatened the further development of *kunqu*. This petition coincided with relevant appeals from other channels and caught the attention of the government.<sup>105</sup> Then, in October 1985, the Ministry of Culture issued the “Notification of the protection and revival of kunju” (*guanyu baohu he zhenxing kunju de tongzhi*), which suggested that the main objective for the time being should be to record some outstanding traditional plays and learn the performing skills therein. This document also suggested an alternative method of preserving traditional plays: reform and adaptation. Besides this, the notification reminded *kunqu* troupes of the key tasks of training new *kunqu* professionals, creating more performance opportunities, and establishing *kunqu* archives.<sup>106</sup> In 1987, the Ministry of Culture issued another document entitled “Notification of adopting special policies for the protection of kunju art” (*Guanyu dui kunju yishu caiqu teshu baohu zhengce de tongzhi*) as a supplementary directive to speed up this process.<sup>107</sup>

In January 1986, the *Kunju* Revival Advisory Committee (*zhenxing kunju zhidao weiyuanhui*) was established by the Ministry of Culture as a special institute dedicated to the task of offering overall guidance for *kunqu* development on a nationwide scale.<sup>108</sup> Under the supervision of this Shanghai-based institution, four *kunqu* training classes were organized to rescue a number of masterpiece performances from senior master singers through a variety of archival techniques, such as audio and video recording and written transcripts. Besides this, several

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<sup>105</sup> Zhou Bing & Jiang Wenbo 2009: 104-105.

<sup>106</sup> Li Yuxi 1986: 52.

<sup>107</sup> Wu Xinlei 2002.

<sup>108</sup> Wu Xinlei 2005: 244.

batches of young singers were trained by these master teachers.<sup>109</sup> Through these training classes, a total number of 133 scenes<sup>110</sup> of traditional performances were taught and recorded, which “laid a good foundation for the further dissemination of *kunqu* art, and provided a new start point for future innovations” (Song Bo 2005: 245). It would have been unimaginable in any previous era to have made such an achievement, merely in terms of the number of plays recorded in such a limited period of time. Obviously, the support of the government as well as the great enthusiasm of both the master teachers and the students played a key part in this process. From this we can surmise that all of these professionals had this sense of self-awareness as guardians and successors of the *kunqu* art.

Although during *kunqu* development in this decade, priority was given to the repertoire restoration through the study and reproduction of classic plays, efforts were also made to explore new ways of development. Some *kunqu* stage productions made global tours and successfully increased the genre’s global presence. The adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, *The Blood-stained Hands* (*Xueshou ji*), stands out as a good example in this regard. For the purposes of my discussion here, I will emphasize the sinicization of this work rather than its Shakespearean origin, and highlight how conventional stylization in *kunqu* art was adapted to translate this western work into a Chinese cultural context.

This 1986 adaptation was produced by the Shanghai *Kunqu* Troupe under the artistic directorship of the renowned Chinese dramatist Huang Zuolin (1906-1994).<sup>111</sup> It was specially commissioned for the First Chinese Shakespeare Festival

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<sup>109</sup> Song Bo 2005: 245.

<sup>110</sup> See “Wenhuabu zhaokai baohu he zhenxing kunqu yishu zoutanhui” at [http://www.ihchina.cn/inc/detail.jsp?info\\_id=177](http://www.ihchina.cn/inc/detail.jsp?info_id=177), accessed 10 January 2011.

<sup>111</sup> Huang Zuolin is a renowned Chinese playwright, drama director and theorist who is widely considered to be

held in Shanghai in 1986. When talking about the reason why *Macbeth* was selected as the source for this production, Huang Zuolin explains,

We choose this tragedy out of all Shakespearean works because the most outstanding feature of this play is the dramatic, emotional, and psychological changes in the characters. The biggest drawback of *kunqu* is its ‘gentleness’ (*wen*)... Refinement and exquisiteness are the innate quality of *kunqu*, yet in modern times we need to reconsider this issue. It seems that we need to pay attention to reform and development on the basis of inheritance. Isn’t it better to maintain *kunqu* while keeping it abreast of modern times? Therefore, by adapting *Macbeth*, I intend to give the gentle genre a shot in the arm. During the rehearsals, we will give full play to the highly stylized performing techniques in *kunqu* (Huang cited in Shen Bin 1988: 41).

The production of such a work involves a lot more than a juxtaposition of a western story with a Chinese traditional operatic genre. Consequently, negotiation and innovation are seen to pervade every single aspect of the production. Firstly, considerable work was done on the script writing: the original five-act *Macbeth* was rescheduled into seven scenes<sup>112</sup> and, while the storyline and plot of Shakespeare’s text was reserved, the entire play is relocated into a Chinese historical context. Secondly, all characters, with invented Chinese names, were played by various conventional *kunqu* role types, and the portrait of each character incorporated the stylized performing techniques of more than one character type. The male protagonist, Ma Pei (i.e. Macbeth) was played by Ji Zhenhua, an “old male” (*laosheng*) singer, but at certain points Ji also adopted the skills of “painted face” (*jing*) and “clown” (*chou*) character types.<sup>113</sup> Similarly, the portrait of Tieshi (Lady Macbeth) combined techniques of “virtuous female” (*guimendan*), “vivacious female” (*huadan*), and “martial female” (*cishadan*).<sup>114</sup> Thirdly, the stage setting

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one of the most significant theatrical figures in twentieth century China. Huang is best known for his establishment of a unique theatre aesthetic by combining techniques of Stanislavsky, Brecht and Mei Lanfang. According to Shen Bin, Huang Zuolin had developed a wish to adapt a Shakespeare play into *kunqu* when he studied at Cambridge in his early years. See Shen Bin 1988: 40.

<sup>112</sup> For a detailed comparison between act/scene divisions of these two versions, see Chen Fang 2008: 15-16.

<sup>113</sup> Ji Zhenhua 1987: 37; Chen Fang 2008: 25.

<sup>114</sup> Shen Bin 1988: 41; Chen Fang 2008: 25-26.

featured a combination of conventional simplicity and discreet use of scenery building. Modern lighting techniques, such as colour lights, follow spots and backlighting, were adopted to create a special visual effect.<sup>115</sup> Finally, the musical composition was based upon the *kunqu* “labelled melody” system (*qupai*), but in order to make changes on the tenderness of *kunqu* as Huang Zuolin suggested, quick-tempo sections were added to highlight the emotional struggles of the characters.<sup>116</sup> However, through a sentence-by-sentence examination, Chen Fang (2008: 36) questioned the musical attainment of this work; judging by the standard of the conventional “labelled melody” system, she criticized the lyrics and musical writing as “completely disordered.”

However, this did not seem to bother this play’s European audiences when it was staged in the UK, Sweden, and Denmark in 1987, where it received a favourable reception. As some scholars point out, those western audiences not familiar with *kunqu* codes of stylization only “concentrated on the sheer spectacle of this work and ignored the language of the body” (cited in Alexander Huang 2004: 6).

The case of Huang’s *The Blood-stained Hands* shows a quest for *kunqu* development in the 1980s, which features a bold combination of tradition and innovation. The traditional aspect is seen in its performing techniques, such as its singing and acting, whereas its innovation is mainly found in its adaptation of the western text. This production represents the early endeavours of Chinese drama artists to explore the possibility of combining *kunqu* aesthetics with western theatrical works, and such an exploration opened up a new horizon for *kunqu*

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<sup>115</sup> Chen Fang 2008: 29; Shen Bin 1988: 41.

<sup>116</sup> Ji Zehnhua 1987: 37.

development as China was becoming increasingly involved in the international community.

Through this examination of *kunqu* in the 1980s, we see that while political interference in drama development receded, the dichotomy between tradition and innovation was brought very much to the foreground. For the first time, the ‘rescue’ and ‘inheritance’ of *kunqu* art was proposed through the official narrative, and was dealt with as a priority. Meanwhile, innovative explorations were made in both literary and performing aspects of *kunqu* works in order to tackle the issues that plagued the genre and hampered its development.

#### **2.4. *Kunqu* in the 1990s: Further Crisis**

As economic reforms and the general opening-up of China advanced at an accelerated pace during the 1990s, rapid social, economic, and cultural changes continued to transform the outlook of the country in every respect. This ever changing, dynamic social climate provided a favourable environment for the proliferation of modern culture and arts. Within this diversifying cultural milieu, traditional opera enjoyed increasing freedom to develop, yet the popularity of modern entertainment forms posed an enormous challenge to its very existence. Just like other traditional operatic genres, *kunqu* continued to evolve during this decade, although it was once again caught in a dilemma between the conservation concerning its own traditions and innovative changes. This section offers a brief sketch of the ongoing discussion on the drama crisis and *kunqu* development during the 1990s. Special focus will be put on the government’s agenda concerning *kunqu* preservation and practices from within the *kunqu* circle itself.



In response to this dilemma confronting all traditional operas, the discussion about the drama crisis that started in the 1980s continued, and similar to the previous discourse, discussants identified the main reasons for this crisis as stemming from both the social surroundings and from within the drama circle. Additionally, and unlike their counterparts of the previous decade, they also started to seek more feasible solutions to these problems. Their proposals can help us determine the trajectory of drama development during the 1990s whilst also providing some insight into the socio-economic changes undertaken in the wider social context.

At the beginning of 1990s, the opera market was so bleak that many opera troupes and companies suffered serious financial difficulties. Some dramatists believed that the government should play its part to help alleviate the problems: Gao Liubin and Zhao Junping (1991: 20-21) observe that the main cause of the drama crisis lay in the low quality of drama works. They suggested that in order to raise the quality, the government needed to a) allocate sufficient allowances to the drama professionals in need, b) carry out comprehensive structural reform, c) cut surplus institutions and put the limited budget to better use, and d) fully appreciate the contribution of capable directors, musicians and dramatists in the production of stage works.

In contrast, as the decade wore on, other dramatists started to reflect upon this prolonged drama crisis issue by situating it within the country's general economic transformation. Shanghai dramatist Chen Duo points out that under the newly-developed market economy, it was time that drama works were taken as cultural commodities. He elaborates to include a change of attitude which would see accepted production practice change from a situation whereby "the audiences can only watch

whatever the theatres stage” to “the theatre will stage whatever the audiences want to watch” (Chen Duo 1998: 22-23). This attitude advocates a market-oriented and audience-centred mode of production, the importance of which Chen termed as “a matter of life and death” (Chen Duo 1998: 22).

Despite the progress made during the previous decade, *kunqu* in the early 1990s was consigned to an even worse situation in its losing battle against other entertainment forms. The *kunqu* circle spared no effort in attending to this issue and, at a special conference held in Suzhou in April 1993, leaders from all professional *kunqu* troupes gathered to discuss the current problems in order to find some solutions. The major problems, as they saw it, were akin to those in the previous decade. The most acute of which was deemed to be the lack of young actors. This is because during the 1980s, priority had been given to the study and preservation of classic performances from senior actors rather than to the training of young actors. As a result, the mainstay professional *kunqu* actors were all now around 50 years of age, while the next generation were still only in their late teens. This came about because the cultivation of actors was suspended during the 1960s and 1970s – a move which was widely considered<sup>117</sup> to have been the most severe blow the Cultural Revolution inflicted on the *kunqu* circles. Yet despite the difficulties they faced, these troupe leaders still tried to keep morale high and started making some long-term plans for their work: one of which was the restaging of all *kunqu* classics. They believed that *kunqu* was the most suitable genre to undertake the task of promoting traditional Chinese culture, and building national confidence and self-esteem.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> For example, see Ye Changhai & Liu Qing 2004: 3-5.

<sup>118</sup> For a detailed record of this important conference, see “1993 nian kunju zuotanhui jiyao”, 1993: 21.

The severity of the *kunqu* crisis also caught the attention of dramatists from outside of the *kunqu* circle. In August of 1993, a group of leading dramatists and scholars including Cao Yu (1910-1996)<sup>119</sup> signed a petition for the protection of *kunqu*. The request read,

...the *kunqu* art is not just a cultural treasure of our nation; it is also a spiritual treasure for all mankind. Recently, many men of vision have suggested that high culture and the arts be supported. We believe that we should start from our own high culture and arts, among which *kunqu* ranks on top...this is a necessity not only for the promotion of outstanding national culture, but also for the enhancement of national confidence and self-esteem.<sup>120</sup>

As a response to this petition, the central government offered sustained support through general guiding principles. In August 1995, the Second General Meeting of the Kunju Revival Advising Committee was convened in Beijing. The Vice Minister of Culture, Gao Zhanxiang, made a keynote speech in which he detailed numerous proposals including structural reform, government subsidy increases, actor training, repertoire building, and better publicity and market exploration. The most noteworthy point of his address is arguably his strong support for reform:

...reform generates motivation for development; reform is also one way for protection, an active way... To protect the innate quality and artistic gene of *kunqu*, we should not blindly or randomly reform... yet without reform there is no progress; without reform there is no way out... (Gao Zhanxiang 1995: 10).

In line with this guiding principle, the efforts of all the professional troupes were split between the learning and preservation of classic performances on the one hand and the mounting of new productions on the other.<sup>121</sup> According to Ke Fan (2008: 78-79), an overwhelming majority of their new productions were revised

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<sup>119</sup> Cao Yu is one of the most famous playwrights who made contribution to the establishment and development of Chinese spoken drama in the twentieth century. See James Brandon 1993: 46.

<sup>120</sup> See "Cao Yu deng xijujia wei zhenxing kunju lianming huyu" 1993: 17.

<sup>121</sup> For an overview of *kunqu* productions of all professional troupes in the post-Cultural Revolution years, see Zhongguo de kunjuyishu 2005: 182-185.

classic plays and newly-written historical plays, whereas contemporary-themed works appear to have been very scarce.

Before we end the discussion about *kunqu* around the turn of the century, it is important to take one more aspect into consideration. Besides striving for a share in the domestic art market, most troupes continued to explore the international market. In fact, their achievements on the international stage appear, somewhat surprisingly perhaps, positive, with some world tours already arousing new interest in traditional Chinese drama during the early 1990s.<sup>122</sup> Interestingly, the sensational reception received in foreign markets is in stark contrast to that received on home soil.<sup>123</sup>

## 2.5. Conclusion

This chapter has covered *kunqu* development in the second half of the twentieth century. Through the examination of this half century we once again see how the socio-political environment can exert a decisive influence on the development of an operatic genre, especially when a regime has a very tight control over the development of art and culture.

Firstly, on the dichotomy between government and populace, the PRC government played a most conspicuous role during these decades in shaping the trajectory of *kunqu* development. This is particularly true of the period between the 1950s and the 1970s when *kunqu* works were incorporated into mass education and political campaigns. The previous actor-centred organizational structure, together with the work of *kunqu* professionals and the *kunqu* repertoire, was subjected to the

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<sup>122</sup> See “1993 nian kunju zuotanhui jiyao”, 1993: 21. For information about *kunqu* performance world tours in the 1980s, see Ke Fan 2008: 41.

<sup>123</sup> For instance, *kunqu* master singer Zhang Jiqing recalls the craze of Taiwanese *kunqu* fans in the 1980s and 1990s. See Zhou Bing & Jiang Wenbo 2009: 105-106.

drama reform campaign and official discourse determined what was to be played and how it was to be played. During this period, the public were obviously positioned on the receiving end, supposedly passive in being guided and educated with whatever the government sanctioned. When it came to the post-1978 years, however, the public gradually regained the opportunity to express their preferences in the theatre, which was seen in the dwindling of audience numbers during the crisis that affected all traditional drama forms. Economic reforms and accompanying social transformation allowed *kunqu* more freedom to develop, but as structural reform of state-ownership of all *kunqu* troupes had not yet been introduced, the government, as the primary sponsor of the genre, still exerted considerable influence through its policies. Yet this influence was never as dominant as it had been during the pre-1978 years.

Secondly, it is also important to note that during this period, the previous conception of *kunqu* as a ‘refined art’ belonging to the elite cliques was replaced by the new assertion that *kunqu* also appeals to the general public (*renminxing*). This became the theoretical basis for the government to explore *kunqu*’s pedagogical potential. Most *kunqu* practitioners also maintained a strong belief in *kunqu*’s public appeal, and consequently, the public’s interests and preferences became key considerations for stage productions. The pursuit of commercial gains through performances was not a major concern in the pre-1978 years. Yet as a market economy gradually took shape, the production of *kunqu* works became more commercialized, which paved the way for *kunqu*’s further development in the new century.

Finally, and most importantly, the interplay between tradition and innovation during these few decades clearly demonstrates the adaptability of *kunqu* as a genre over the course of its long history. There was no fixed paradigm for the dichotomy between tradition and innovation and their power relations were largely determined by the choices of *kunqu* practitioners (as was shown in Chapter 1), which in turn were ultimately results of the social, political and economic environment at the time. Under the strict censorship in operation during the early years of the PRC, innovations were made in the newly adapted *kunqu* works to meet the requirements of the state's ideological needs, whereas in the post-Cultural Revolution years, innovations were made in stage works in an effort to explore the market and increase the audience base. Traditions, on the other hand, were passed down through the conventional master-student training system and the state-endorsed rescue programs such as repertoire restoration. But still, the so-called 'traditions' had already undergone changes along the artistic lineage, and the process of evolution was still underway, as the changes were inevitable during the transmission of *kunqu* art.

### CHAPTER THREE    The Production of Pai Hsien-yung's "Young Lovers' Version" of *The Peony Pavilion*

In recent years, the renowned Taiwanese writer Pai Hsien-yung has come under the spotlight in Chinese *kunqu* circle because of his latest adaptation of the *kunqu* classic *The Peony Pavilion* that was dubbed "the young-lovers' version" (*qingchun ban*). After its debut in Taipei in April 2004, this production has been watched by hundreds of thousands of people both from inside and outside of the mainland of China, thus making this stage work arguably the most widely viewed play in modern *kunqu* history. Pai's *Peony* was produced under the backdrop of the UNESCO's designation of China's *kunqu* as a part of "the oral and intangible cultural heritage of humanity" in May 2001. For many dramatists, critics as well as government representatives within China, this declaration not only brought justification to claims that more serious attention be paid to this time-honoured operatic genre, but also to make this task be regarded as a serious responsibility.

Immediately after this UNESCO designation, the "Forum for the protection and innovation in *kunqu* art" was convened in Beijing in June 2001 by the Chinese Ministry of Culture.<sup>124</sup> Members of the *Kunqu* Revival Advisory Committee, local cultural officials from Beijing, Shanghai, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Hunan, as well as leaders of the various *kunqu* troupes, gathered to contribute their advice and suggestions for the preservation and development of *kunqu* in the years to come. In his address, the then Minister of Culture, Sun Jiazheng, commented that the long-

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<sup>124</sup> For a detailed report of this forum, see "Wenhuabu zhaokai baohu he zhenxing kunqu yishu zuotanhui", *China Culture Daily*, 12 June, 2001.

term cause of *kunqu* preservation would require a more detailed, feasible blue-print under general slogan of “protect, inherit, innovate, and develop” (*baohu, jicheng, gexin, fazhan*). Just six months after this forum, the Ministry passed the “Ten-year plan of *kunqu* art protection and revival” (*Baohu he zhenxing kunqu yishu shinian guihua*), which further clarified the guiding principle, aim, and measures of this task. Then in 2004, the Ministry of Cultural and Ministry of Finance initiated “the scheme for the rescue, protection and support of national *kunqu* art” (*Guojia kunqu yishu qiangjiu, baohu he fuchi gongcheng shishi fang'an*), under which an annual budget of ten million yuan would be allocated for *kunqu* preservation and development for a five-year course.<sup>125</sup> Although under this plan, the problem of funding shortage was somewhat eased, there still was not any effective means to reverse the diminishing of audiences.

Around the turn of the century, another two stage productions of *Peony* have drawn considerable attention of the public: one is the 55-scene *Peony* produced by Chinese American director Chen Shizheng that was premiered in 1999 at New York Lincoln Centre and toured to Europe, and the other is the 33-scene version of the play presented by Shanghai *Kunqu* Troupe in October of the same year. Although both works were dubbed complete-version productions, neither has been as successful as Pai's *Peony* in terms of audience reception.

In this chapter, I will firstly offer a brief overview of Pai's long-time efforts to promote *kunqu* art, which helps explain his determination to start this large-scale adaptation of *Peony*. Then I will explore the “youth” theme of this work and the particular balance between conventional tradition and modern innovations that Pai

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<sup>125</sup> “Kunqu xianzhuang ji duice”, *China Cultural Daily*, 9 December, 2003.



chose for this production. Section 3 and 4 will examine the selection and training of the leading cast members, and the re-editing of the play script: both aspects serve to justify Pai's claim that his adaptation is authentic and traditional. The remaining sections will specifically explore stage setting, acting, costuming and music of this adaptation to reveal its innovative nature. Through this detailed study, I propose to answer the following three questions: why is the youth-theme necessary and effective in the Chinese social context of today? How can this work be both old and new, or both traditional and innovative? And why does such a balance work for modern audiences?

In the Chinese drama world, discussions on the dichotomy between tradition and innovation have been ongoing for decades, particularly when it comes to the preservation and development of such traditional operas as *kunqu* and Peking opera. Pai's production of *Peony* provides us a valuable case by which we can explore this topic in the twenty-first century. On the one hand, Pai claimed that his *Peony* would be a production to represent the "authentic, orthodox, and legitimate" (*zhengzong, zhengtong, zhengpai*) *kunqu* art,<sup>126</sup> on the other hand, he also stressed that new aesthetic values were to be blended in this work so as to attract modern audiences. For Pai these seemingly paradoxical approaches are actually necessary for linking the *kunqu* art and its modern audiences.

Through a detailed analysis of the production of Pai's *Peony*, we will see that the "youth" theme is not just a tactic on the terminological level; more importantly it marked a unique way of blending the conventional elements with modern technologies in the stage production. The analysis will also show that *kunqu*

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<sup>126</sup> Pai has claimed the authenticity of his *Peony* on many occasions. For example, see the interview "Yi ge minzu yiding yaoyou jingying wenhua" at <http://culture.people.com.cn/GB/42496/42501/3304860.html>, accessed 21 November, 2010.

production has now transcended its traditional borders and involved many artistic professionals from outside Chinese *kunqu* circle, who bring with them the non-*kunqu* and non-conventional artistic and literary elements that eventually leave their mark on the overall appearance of the stage productions.

### 3.1. A Decades-long Dream: From *Kunqu* Preservation to Cultural Revival

“A dream of youth” (*qingchun meng*) is used as a pun in the publicity of Pai Hsien-yung’s *Peony* to suggest both the female protagonist of the play Du Liniang’s longing for romantic love and the decades-long dream of Pai himself for the production of an authentic *kunqu* play. Pai’s fervent interest in *kunqu* started from an early-age theatre-going experience: in 1945, at the age of ten, he watched the signature scene “The Interrupted Dream” (*jingmeng*) from *Peony* acted by Mei Lanfang (1894-1961) and Yu Zhenfei (1902-1993).<sup>127</sup> To Pai, *kunqu* is the most exquisite operatic form and represents the highest artistic form in Chinese culture. The modern Chinese writer and cultural critic Yu Qiuyu is probably one of the only few who share Pai’s view on this point.<sup>128</sup> When *kunqu* was designated as cultural heritage by UNESCO, Pai believed that a new age had come for preserving this art form and presenting it to the rest of the world. (Pai 2004b: 7)

Pai’s aspiration for *kunqu* preservation was closely connected to his concern with the development of traditional Chinese culture in modern society. Since his early

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<sup>127</sup> Although Mei Lanfang is a celebrated Peking opera master singer, he was also known for his superb *kunqu* performances. In fact, the virtuosity in *kunqu* was considered a must for Peking opera singers during late Qing and early Republican times. Yu Zhenfei is one of the most celebrated *kunqu* male singer in the twentieth century. This stage collaboration was Mei’s first public performance after the end of the Second World War.

<sup>128</sup> In his scholarly writings, Yu Qiuyu firmly holds that *kunqu* is the pinnacle of ancient Chinese drama, which forms a clear contradiction against the stance taken by many famous dramatists, including the famous drama historian Wang Guowei, who believed that Chinese drama had been “dead” since the Yuan dynasty. See Pai 2004b: 6-8.

years, Pai had felt great anxiety for the dwindling of traditional Chinese culture and art, particularly during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Because of this feeling of anxiety, Pai never stopped exploring new ways to preserve traditional culture in the modern contexts. During 1960s, he launched Taiwan's famous literary journal *Xiandai wenxue* (Modern Literature); in the 1980s, he incorporated traditional *kunqu* performances into his spoken drama production; and now he put up a new *kunqu* work produced with international investment and trans-regional collaboration. As he himself put it, all these activities should be best summarized as "cultural innovations." Through these endeavours, he aimed at "creating new literary directions, new stage aesthetics, and new opera lives... all for the pursuit of a new cultural directions" (Pai 2006: 80, 87). *Kunqu* art, in Pai's eyes, could serve as a gateway to the rejuvenation of traditional Chinese culture. He believed that *kunqu* is the most refined performing art of the Chinese nation, and can be utilized as the most representative "visual" art to re-establish the nation's cultural identity (Pai 2006: 83-86).

Pai has actually been actively promoting *kunqu* art in Taiwan for over twenty years, yet these early endeavours were not widely known until after his young-lovers' version of *Peony* was staged. He has been involved in *kunqu* productions three times since the 1980s: the first production was the 1982 spoken drama "Wandering in the Garden and Interrupted Dream" (*youyuan jingmeng*) that incorporated traditional *kunqu* performances. This stage work was based on his own novelette of the same title.<sup>129</sup> Pai treated this production as "an experiment in

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<sup>129</sup> This work was included in Pai's most famous novel *Taipei People* (*Taipei ren*). It narrates the story of Madame Qian, a former *kunqu* singer in Nanjing who married a KMT general and moved to Taipei; she attended a friend's house party where her experiences made her feel that one's life is just like a dream. In this story, Pai used the best known scenes of "Wandering in the garden" and "The Interrupted Dream" in *The Peony Pavilion*.

creating a Chinese-style spoken drama featuring traditional Chinese opera as a prominent element” (Pai 2006: 82). The second production was mounted in 1983 – a small-scale traditional work consisting of only two mostly staged scenes of *The Peony Pavilion*: “The Schoolroom” (*Chunxiang naoxue*) and “The Interrupted Dream”. Then in 1992, Pai produced a seven-scene version of *The Peony Pavilion* in Taipei with Hua Wenyi, a famous *kunqu* singer from Shanghai, and Gao Huilan, a Peking opera singer from Taiwan as the leading singers.<sup>130</sup> His aspiration for making an even bigger show of *Peony* was inspired by these early endeavours which he had considered to be successful but not fully satisfactory.

These *kunqu* productions, although on an amateur level, clearly marked Pai’s directorial trajectory: on the one hand he has constantly sought to restage classic works, and on the other hand he has actively embraced any changes he saw appropriate to suit the stage needs at any given moment. This approach has been strictly followed in his young-lovers’ version, and his sense of responsibility aroused by the feeling of anxiety for cultural revival has never diminished. It is this sense of responsibility that urged Pai to keep pursuing the most feasible way to produce *kunqu* and make it attractive to a greater number of audiences. Also it is this sense of responsibility that won him loyal support from both production teams and audiences, especially those who were not at all familiar with *kunqu* before they attended this young-lovers version of *Peony*. Therefore, upon the news of the 2001 UNESCO designation, Pai saw a most valuable opportunity for *kunqu* promotion. “If we don’t

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<sup>130</sup> Pai recounted these early *kunqu* productions in detail during an interview with Wang Zhi in May 2007 in the talk show *Mian dui mian* (Face to Face) “Bai Xianyong – qingchun nianxiang” (Pai Hsien-yung – memory of youth) which was broadcast on CCTV news channel. See <http://space.tv.cctv.com/video/VIDE1179674412000107>, accessed 20 November 2010.

make this attempt, I think *kunqu* will possibly really fall into further decline,” he said in the above mentioned “Face to Face” interview.<sup>131</sup>

In Pai’s eyes, like opera in Italy, classical music in Germany, and *Noh* drama in Japan, *kunqu* is capable of embodying the Chinese nation’s spirit and aesthetics. It is capable of demonstrating the exquisiteness of Chinese culture, including music, dance and literature, so it is *kunqu*, rather than any other art form, that can best represent traditional Chinese culture in modern society. Meanwhile, Pai believed that the performing system of *kunqu* is also open for change and alteration. If other cultural icons such as calligraphic works and Suzhou embroidery are added, the superb artistic power of the genre will be greatly enhanced. (Pai 2006: 84-85)

This link between Pai’s personal aspiration for producing an authentic, complete *kunqu* play with the preservation of *kunqu* art and the revival of traditional Chinese culture has set him aside from many other advocates involved in *kunqu* production in recent years. Many *kunqu* audiences and Pai’s faithful readers greatly appreciated Pai’s vision and endeavours, especially because as a writer he had to put aside his own writing career so as to concentrate on this opera project. Even some critics who hold negative views on Pai’s production acknowledged his lofty motive of *kunqu* preservation.

### **3.2. The “Youth” Theme and the Balance between Tradition and Innovation**

Just as he had done in the past decades, Pai adopted a flexible approach in the production of his young-lovers’ version of *Peony*. On the one hand, he had no intention to break away from *kunqu* traditions – in fact, he put the *kunqu* conventions

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<sup>131</sup> See *ibid.*

that he considered to be “authentic” at the core of his production; on the other hand, he was ready to take advantage of modern technologies to help present these core values to the modern audiences. To realize this aim, he worked out a “youth” theme for this new adaptation, and managed to find a delicate balance between tradition and innovation that he considered most appropriate.

Pai drew the direct inspiration for the “youth” theme from his own experience of offering *kunqu* lectures to about 1500 high school students in Hong Kong in 2002. The topic of his lectures was romantic love in *kunqu* plays. In order to attract these young students and keep them interested throughout the lectures, Pai used demonstration performances by four young *kunqu* singers from Suzhou *Kunqu* Troupe. This presentation was very warmly received. From the students’ great enthusiasm for the young singers’ performances, Pai seemed to find a possible way to target the young audiences. At the same time, Cai Shaohua, Director of Suzhou *Kunqu* Troupe, also wished to seek cooperation with Pai. To him, Pai’s passion for *kunqu* preservation and his fame as a literary celebrity were invaluable for their potential collaboration. This mutual interest became the basis of the launch of this production.<sup>132</sup>

Pai branded his new adaptation as the “young-lovers’ version”. This “youth” theme has three layers of denotation: firstly, he aimed to recruit and train a group of young performers as leading cast members of this production; secondly, this production would primarily target the young audiences; and thirdly, the production would focus on the romantic love between the play’s young protagonists (Pai 2004c: 13-15). Modern dramatist Zhu Donglin believes that the tactic of entrusting leading

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<sup>132</sup> “Pai Hsien-yung qingqing mudan ting: kunqu zhong de nanhuan nü’ ai”, <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/wenhua/1088/2451969.html>, accessed 21 November 2010.

roles to fledgling young actors can be traced back to the earlier history of *kunqu* development. Zhu justified the necessity of this practice in today's *kunqu* production by quoting a young audience member's expression of his discomfort when watching senior performers play the young roles in this play (2006: 98-99). Pai holds similar views on this aspect. He says that if Du Liniang's role is played by a performer aged over sixty, it would be difficult for young audiences to remain enthralled and finish the entire play (Pai 2004a: 228).

Then, why would the "youth" theme be attractive to the young people as potential audiences? *Kunqu* has been mostly criticized for its slow tempo and outdated subject matters. To overcome these "defects," one has to find out a very strong selling point that appeals to modern audiences. In order to understand why Pai has selected the "youth" theme as a selling point, we need to see his *kunqu* aesthetic vision: as mentioned above, Pai holds a firm belief that *kunqu* represents the supreme form of Chinese classical aesthetics. This is a type of pure, Chinese beauty that features freshness, elegance and youthfulness (Pai 2004c: 13-14; Pai 2006: 86). The classic play *Peony* provides a wonderful chance to present this Chinese-type theatrical beauty: it contains many elements associated with both "youth" and beauty – the spring season, blooming, young protagonists, and their undying love. On the physical level, the "youth" theme can be depicted by the young performers' good-looking physiques, vigour and vitality, a bypass strategy that cleverly addresses today's young audiences' visual-oriented consumption habit – which is true at least in their theatre-going experiences. On the emotional level, this "youth" theme can be expressed through the romance between the two protagonists. Romantic love, as Pai suggests, is a topic that holds a universal appeal for all people, particularly the young

people.<sup>133</sup> By setting the target of attracting young audiences, Pai knew that he would need to deal with a generation with different tastes and preferences in cultural consumption. His choice of this “youth” theme revealed his keen observation of these tastes and preferences. Through his 2002 Hong Kong lecturing experience, he saw this “youth” theme as a viable choice for his new production.

The circle of critics did not show much disagreement with this youth strategy. However, there is obviously a paradox in the selection of this strategy. On one hand, the name “young-lovers’ version” suggests that this is only one of the many possible versions of interpretation of this masterpiece of *kunqu* art; on the other hand, Pai did not explicitly point this out, to help the audiences understand that this single production can not possibly represent the whole of *kunqu* art – it can not present the entire array of *kunqu* role types, nor can it include all *kunqu* aesthetic elements. It is rather alarming that this play would potentially mislead those young audiences that have been attracted into the theatre.

Zhang Weidong, an actor at the Northern *Kunqu* Troupe and a *kunqu* conservationist, dismissed Pai’s young-lovers’ version strategy as “vulgar” (*suqi*) and not fitting with the conventional *kunqu* aesthetics of the Ming and Qing times.<sup>134</sup>

In 1992, when talking about his seven-scene *Peony*, Pai had already expressed his belief that the combination of tradition and innovation would be the general trend of cultural development (Pai 2004a: 171). He believed in the necessity of reform in *kunqu*: “as long as the revision is good and beautiful, it wouldn’t matter if it is a production in an orthodox sense.” He justified his assertion by referring to Mei

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<sup>133</sup> Pai expressed this belief in my interview with him in summer 2008. See Appendix 4.

<sup>134</sup> Zhang discussed what kind of *kunqu* art should be passed on to future generations in an interview at the cultural channel of China’s internet portal sohu.com. See “Jiujing gei houren liu shenmeyang de kunqu”, <http://cul.sohu.com/20081215/n261222214.shtml>, accessed 21 November 2010.



Lanfang's reform of Peking opera in the 1920s (Pai 2004a: 174). This claim offers him historical authority for innovation in stage production. When talking about his attitudes towards tradition, Pai expressed that he was never a person who opposes tradition. On the contrary, he was constantly seeking the revival of Chinese cultural traditions. He believed that "revival is not being conservative... new life comes from new elements... Without innovation, culture will be rigidified, or even simply die" (Pai 2006: 87-88).

For the young-lovers' version of *Peony*, Pai set a guiding principle for his production as "we respect tradition, but do not follow it unquestionably; we employ what is modern, but do not misuse it." He further explains that, "we are clothing a traditional opera in modern garb." This analogy best captures the relationship between tradition and modernity in his *kunqu* production. Pai believes that this production will adhere to the "authentic" styles of singing, acting and recitation. Meanwhile, modern lighting techniques and stage design will be utilized to enhance the performance.<sup>135</sup>

This guiding principle, and its implementation, as we will see in the next few sections, demonstrates many original ideas that have never been adopted by any previous *kunqu* producers. Huang Shusen<sup>136</sup> argues that Pai's production has best demonstrated advertising master James Webb Young's well-known words, "an idea is nothing more or less than a new combination of old elements." According to Huang's observation, Pai's creativity is seen not just within actor training, play text

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<sup>135</sup> Pai talked about this principle in many interviews, mostly in Chinese. This English version and its elaboration is quoted from his own words printed in the Irvine Barclay Theatre playbill.

<sup>136</sup> Huang Shusen is a cultural critic who is best known for his keen and timely critiques on many newly emerging cultural and social phenomena during the last three decades of reform and opening-up era. He holds positions at Guangdong Literary and Artistic Critics Association, Sun Yat-sun University and Guangdong Academy of Social Sciences. He is the first scholar to have introduced Pai Hsien-yung's literary works into PRC in 1979.

revision, stage setting and choreography, but also the planning of tour performances (Pai 2006: 12).

If put into the *kunqu* production narrative around the turn of this century, Pai's attempt is by no means the first to adopt the principle that combines both tradition and innovation. If we only look at those productions of similar scales, i.e., complete-play production, Shanghai *Kunqu* Troupe's *The Peony Pavilion* in 1999 and Gu Duhuang's *The Palace of Eternal Youth* in 2004 both experimented to find a way to revive *kunqu*, yet neither achieved the same level of influence as Pai's young-lovers' version *Peony* did. These efforts by contemporary producers provide Pai with useful references, and at the same time help to form a full picture *kunqu* production in these years.

It is quite obvious that the very concept of making this production into a young-lovers' version is itself a kind of innovation. There has not been any previous stage production that specifically branded itself as such to appeal to a certain section of the general public. As was shown in Chapter 2, the loss of audiences, particularly young audiences, has been addressed as one of the most serious problems that confront today's *kunqu* art, but there has not been any strategy worked out specifically to tackle this problem. Pai's plan is thus the first of its kind.

In contrast to the attempts at innovation through modernization, another approach to preserve *kunqu* is to historicise it and preserve it as a cultural relic in its original form. Lou Yulie, a philosophy professor at Peking University and an active participant of Beijing *Kunqu* Society, once admitted that Pai's endeavours for *kunqu* preservation deserve much admiration. But meanwhile, he explicitly doubted that the best part of *kunqu* art can be expressed through the "youth" theme in Pai's *Peony*.

Lou believed that *kunqu* preservation should not incorporate any innovative practices. He said that one need not purposefully seek to attract audiences for *kunqu* performances, and the best way to preserve authentic *kunqu* art is to put it into museum like a cultural relic. Any alteration will damage its original quality. Lou also suggested that the best way to inherit *kunqu* would be to pass down what we know about its performance rather than making any changes and innovations. Lou admitted that changes are inevitable during *kunqu* inheritance since this art is taught by oral instruction and physical demonstration, but he insisted that any intentional alteration is not acceptable.<sup>137</sup> Therefore, we may understand the change he refers to as some kind of gradual, unintentional change rather than dynamic and purposeful change.

Then why did Pai set this principle of only preserving only some conventional elements in his young-lovers' version *Peony*?

It has become a common practice for drama critics to compare any *kunqu* productions against something they call “*kunqu* tradition” – be it a reproduction of a classic play or a newly-edited work. Pai's *Peony* is no exception. Most reviews and studies published in recent years hailed it as one of the best examples that has preserved *kunqu* tradition. However, as noted in the previous chapters, the definition of *kunqu* tradition is highly elusive and subject to personal interpretation. Therefore, to some such as Pai himself, the idea of tradition is indeed fluid and it is ripe for reconstruction and development, but for others, for instance Lou Yulie, tradition is an embodiment of some fixed features that have already been developed in the past and are not subject to any further change or alteration. This distinction of belief from the essential basis explains the very different approaches of *kunqu* preservation and the

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<sup>137</sup> Lou Yulei made these remarks on a *kunqu* lecture at Peking University. For the full text of the lecture, see “Kunqu yu feiwuzhi wenhua yichan”, <http://www.aisixiang.com/data/detail.php?id=11170>, accessed 22 November 2010.

dispute towards innovation. Pai's plan was to protect *kunqu* art from extinction and revive it, even if this had to be done at the price of adopting changes. On the contrary, conservationists see the need to protect *kunqu* art from being changed at all, even if this is done at the price of letting *kunqu* die out from the opera market.

Despite decades of debates, there has been no consensus over which stage productions during *kunqu* history are more standard than others. "Keeping the original sauce and the original flavour" (*yuanzhi yuanwei*) is a description full of ambiguity; there are no fixed parameters with respect to what is more traditional than others. Wang Ning believes that whether or not something has "original sauce and original flavour" totally depends on one's personal assumptions (Liao & Wang, 2010: 31). To what extent a certain production is viewed to be authentically traditional may vary greatly among different audiences. Therefore, instead of being entangled in forming a judgement as to whether Pai's production is authentic or traditional, it might be more meaningful to discuss what his own standard for this production is and how he has used it as the guiding principle for the whole process.

Under Pai's slogan "Classics for the essence, and modernity for practical use" (*gudian wei ti, xiandai wei yong*) (Pai 2004c: 15), he would take certain *kunqu* conventional elements (i.e. those elements he considers to be traditional) as the basis of his production. Then what are these elements? Among the different *kunqu* schools, Pai selected the Suzhou school in that Suzhou is the birthplace of *kunqu* art. On the other hand, he greatly valued the artistic lineage of *kunqu* development: he put his young cast members under the training of *kunqu* masters Zhang Jiqing (1938-) and Wang Shiyu (1941-), both of whom were disciples of the "*chuan*" generation of performers. Zhang and Wang were two of the most authoritative heirs of *kunqu* art

(Pai 2004a: 220). Through this master-student bond, the cast members of Pai's young-lovers' version would earn the genealogical connection with earlier generations of masters. Yet it should be noted that only the singing and acting conventions of these masters were preserved in this production whereas innovations were made in every other aspect as I will discuss in the next few sections. Aesthetically, what Pai has been promoting as "traditional" was "simplicity, abstractness and lyricism," something he believed to be typical of *kunqu* art. (Pai 2004c: 14)

Pai's "youth" theme and twin principles of tradition and innovation were not directly inspired by any official policies adopted by the PRC government for *kunqu* preservation. However, there has been a striking similarity in the open-minded approach to the art about innovation. The socio-cultural environment within China in the years immediately following the UNESCO designation was crucial for Pai to establish his collaboration with the Suzhou *Kunqu* Troupe, one of the few state-owned *kunqu* institutions. Besides, Pai's aspiration to promote traditional Chinese culture through the invigoration of *kunqu* art also helped to earn government endorsement for his production, which will be discussed in Chapter 4.

### **3.3. Carving the Raw Jade: the Selection and Training of Cast Members**

According to the "youth" theme, the first step would be the selection of young performers. Most of the cast members, including the male lead Yu Jiulin and female lead Shen Fengying, were in their early 20s, and they were selected from the "Little Orchid Class" (*Xiao lanhua ban*), a young *kunqu* actor training class in Suzhou *Kunqu* Troupe. Actually Yu Jiulin had been hand-picked by Pai himself to give

demonstration performances during Pai's 2002 Hong Kong *kunqu* lectures. As Shen reveals, "Previously, all performers entitled to play leading characters were in their 30s or 40s or even older, an age band when the actors reach their full artistic maturity. But Pai insisted on entrusting the leading roles to us, and this practice has been followed by some *kunqu* troupes over the following few years, and to some extent changed the previous practice in the drama field."<sup>138</sup>

Pai was aware that the good-looking physique of the young actors is far from enough. He saw that skilful singing and acting were just as crucial as appearance. He needed to maximize the advantage of these actors' young age, and at the same time minimize the limitations of their performance skills. To achieve this goal, he would need to invite the best master teachers to "carve the raw jade." Zhang Jiqing, one of the most celebrated *dan* (female role) singers, and Wang Shiyu, one of the top *sheng* (male role) singers, both in their 60s, were persuaded to take this job. This arrangement is indeed an innovation since it was the first time for masters from different *kunqu* schools and different troupes to collaborate on a single stage production. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, junior performers were trained in almost every *kunqu* troupe on the mainland, yet none of them had adopted such an approach to assign the teaching of hand-picked top students to specific masters, and measuring the achievements of their training through a specific stage production (Pai 2004b: 109).

In order to solidify the master-student bond, Pai organized a formal "bowing before the master teachers" (*baishi*) ceremony on 19 November 2003. The ceremony of accepting personal students of this kind, a practice of the traditional opera circle in

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<sup>138</sup> See Deng Bo, "Zou xia wutai meiyou aiqing", *Yangcheng wanbao*, 6 December 2006, [http://www.ycwb.com/ycwb/2006-12/05/content\\_1306335.htm](http://www.ycwb.com/ycwb/2006-12/05/content_1306335.htm), accessed 22 November 2010.

Chinese feudal societies, had been abandoned ever since the founding of PRC. *Kunqu* students in these past decades were trained in drama schools. *Kunqu* masters based in professional troupes also taught at these schools, but they did not take any personal disciples. By reintroducing this practice into *kunqu* circle, Pai believed that the master-student bonding would generate a sense of social responsibility and would be one of the best means to realise the inheritance of intangible heritage from one generation to the next (Wu & Pai 2007: 95).

This formal ceremony, in Pai's eyes, means much more than a ritual; it is a "traditional custom", through which a relationship is built between the master teachers and the students. This relationship is akin to that between father and child. This ceremony signifies the impossibility of betrayal and honest trust. "One year of teaching from a good teacher matches ten years of hard training" (Pai 2004a: 222-23). This ceremony not only marked a departure from the school-based *kunqu* student training mode practiced in every local region, but also initiated the establishment of master-student relations across different regions – all seven students were from Suzhou, but the three masters were from Nanjing, Hangzhou and Shanghai<sup>139</sup> – then facilitated the collaborations among these masters and students in a trans-local context.

Not all actors agreed to reintroduce the ceremony of accepting personal disciples. Zhang Jiqing, especially, was concerned that such a fixed master-disciple bond would prevent the students from seeking advice from a broad range of teachers. In her view, the ceremony would foster a sectarian attitude. However, Pai hoped that this bond would arouse a sense of responsibility for life-long commitment to

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<sup>139</sup> Apart from Zhang Jiqing and Wang Shiyu, Cai Zhengren (1941-) from Shanghai *Kunqu* Troupe was also invited to be teacher for the cast members. Cai is one of the best known *sheng* (male role) singers.

improving the students' performing skills and the professional life of the students. This is the crucially important method by which to offer the students the opportunity to learn the best skills from their teachers, thus making possible the transmission of *kunqu* art. As Goldstein observed, "... when an adult actor taught a student his signature play, he was performing an intimate and emotional act: he was giving away his secrets, his public identity, and his means of making a living. The importance of this gift was never lost on a student" (Goldstein 2007: 38). With the persuasion of Pai, Zhang finally agreed to take students for this play. After this formal ceremony, Zhang admitted that she had felt something "magic" happened. "From that day when I formally took these young girls as my students, I felt that I need to shoulder a life-long responsibility for them. This is a delight but also a heavy responsibility. I even felt that apart from artistic training, I should also give them guidance on how to be a good person" (Pai 2004a: 110).

On the students' side, this bonding has offered them a chance to learn from renowned masters, to build their virtuosity not just on the basis of imitating the masters' acting and singing, but to more profoundly understand the characters' personal traits with the explanation of their masters, and to act with more depth and accuracy. Shen Fengying has talked about the ceremony in an interview:

At first we felt it was fun, but once we knelt down and kowtowed to the masters, we suddenly felt the solemnity, just as we were entrusting ourselves to the teachers. Actually the ceremony may have a greater significance for the teachers. It means that they agree to take responsibility when they accept the students' knee bows. I am really appreciative to Master Zhang and Mr. Pai. Without their guidance, it would have been virtually impossible for me to reach the attainment I have today.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> See Cui Qingqing, "Zhuozhuo xiangying hong, qingshui chu furong," see: <http://www.pku-hall.com/WYPPZZ.aspx?id=905>, accessed 22 November 2010.



Within about one year, the students went through initial training, learning, practice and rehearsal under the strict guidance of the master teachers. Their achievements were measured by their debut performance in Taipei and generally met the expectations of the production team and the audiences. This being said, I would like to point out some unconventional features of this young actor training scheme.

Firstly, the young actors were put onto a three-month programme of intensive physical training. This was seen as necessary because Wang Shiyu felt that the basic skills that the two leading performers had acquired were far too weak to embark upon the learning of the play. Besides, they needed to build a kind of disposition full of vigour and vitality so as to best depict the young characters in the play. At Suzhou *Kunqu* Troupe, a typical day of training would start at seven o'clock in the morning, and end at five in the afternoon, including a ninety-minute lunch break. Apart from vocal exercise, most of their time was spent on the practice of gesture, posture, movement, stage walking, water sleeves, eye expressions, and necessary gymnastic skills. The most challenging session of this intensive training was the sinew stretching like that ballet dancers undertake during their physical training. Yu Jiulin, a 25-year-old back then, found the physical pain caused by all those chest and shoulder expansions, back stretches, and leg stretches simply beyond endurance. He said that he could find no better words to describe the suffering than “the bones were crackling, and the muscles were burning” (cited in Pai 2004a: 126).

Through this rigid ballet-style physical training, all seven young cast members acquired a youthful disposition; both Shen Fengying and Yu Jiulin fulfilled the aim of playing the characters of Du and Liu in an expected youthful way. However, this kind of physical training was non-existent in *kunqu* circles, and this balletic talent

has by no means been the standard quality of a *kunqu* actor in the past, not even in a traditional version of the same play *Peony*. Reviewing Mei Lanfang's acting in "Wandering in the Garden" (*Youyuan jingmeng*), Cao Qimin wrote,

He (Mei) expressed Du Liniang's yearning for love in a restrained, languishing way, with a bit of shyness; it makes one feel depressed. His movements were gentle and quiet. Such demeanour faithfully depicted how a young maiden restricted in a boudoir would act (Zhou Bing & Jiang Wenbo 2009: 134).

But in contrast, Shen Fengying depicted the heroine totally differently in this scene in the young-lovers' version. Zhang Weidong criticised, "(Sheng Fengying) expressed Du's hunger for love too explicitly and unrestrainedly." Zhang dismissed Pai's "youth" approach as totally misleading (Zhang Weidong 2004).

Besides, it is obvious that it is not possible to fulfil the aim of training a generation of capable young actors through such a short period of intensive training. According to the conventional practice, it would take many years for an opera singer to develop his proper physical techniques for his future performance career – ideally these must be built up, step by step, starting at an early age. Most of today's *kunqu* students, however, only entered the drama school in their teens, thus having missed the best time to start their physical training. It seems impossible that Pai's initiation of the master-student bonding will improve the quality of the young actors if the current actor training system does not go through a profound reform.

Secondly, through his special training scheme Pai had hoped to nurture a group of promising performers. However, judging from the outcome of his *Peony*, it seems that only the leading singers Shen Fengying and Yu Jiulin are the biggest beneficiaries. Their being launched into stardom with their leading roles in the play marks a sharp contrast with the other cast members' relatively low achievement. By

taking a look at this rarely reported “side effect,” we can gain a better understanding of what the limitations of Pai’s actor training scheme are.

In an interview by China Central Television channel 4 (CCTV4) on the topic of Pai’s *Peony*,<sup>141</sup> several actors from Suzhou *Kunqu* Troupe confided their thoughts about this production. Shao Ting said, “Among all those actors in the “Little Orchard Class”, only Shen Fengying became a leading singer... All the others in the class are the ‘green leaves’, and there is only one ‘red flower’.” Xia Xianling continued, “Not just accommodation, she (i.e. Shen Fengying) was treated much better than the rest of us, including performance fees, etc...” Such a sense of frustration is perhaps most acutely felt by Gu Weiyong, who had been Suzhou *Kunqu* Troupe’s leading actress specialised in young female role (*guimen dan*) and had been playing Du Liniang in *Peony* for many years prior to the production of Pai’s young-lovers’ version. In the leading cast audition, Gu Weiyong lost out to Shen Fengying mainly because in the eyes of Pai, her appearance in makeup was not as good as that of Shen. Thus she was assigned a minor role as one of the twelve floral gods – a “figurant in traditional opera” (*longtao*). This drastic deterioration of position caused very complex distress and perplexity to Gu Weiyong.<sup>142</sup> She eventually left her job in the Suzhou troupe, and was relocated at the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Art in 2008 as a full-time teacher.<sup>143</sup> It seems not so important whether or not Gu’s departure was directly caused by her recent experience in the young-lovers’ version *Peony*. What is worth noticing is that Pai had not expected that the nurturing of two leading actors would

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<sup>141</sup> This interview was broadcast in the programme of *Huaren shijie* (The world of Chinese people) on 01 February 2008. For details, see [http://news.cctv.com/20080201/103220\\_1.shtml](http://news.cctv.com/20080201/103220_1.shtml), accessed 22 November 2010.

<sup>142</sup> About the dispute over the selection of the leading cast members, see “Shizuoyong zhe shuo laiyou: guanyu qingchun ban mudan ting”, <http://mingkok.buddhistdoor.com/cht/news/d/1651>, accessed 22 November, 2010.

<sup>143</sup> See “Gu Weiyong de kunqu zhilu”, [http://www.ccdy.cn/renwu/content/2011-01/05/content\\_747181.htm](http://www.ccdy.cn/renwu/content/2011-01/05/content_747181.htm), accessed 20 May 2011.

be achieved at the cost of other actors and roles. This I believe would not be what Pai had wanted in view of his aspiration for a *kunqu* revival.

### 3.4. The Re-editing of the Play Text

During the twentieth century, literary readings of Tang Xianzu's original text of *The Peony Pavilion* have centred on the contention between the personal pursuit of "passion", or "romantic love" (*qing*) and the restriction of Neo-Confucianism "reason" (*li*).<sup>144</sup> Yet in recent years, the original play text has been read in more diversified perspectives.<sup>145</sup> But Pai's choice of the theme of passion justified his adaptation's fidelity to the original play, and thus contributed to the authenticity of the production as a classical *kunqu* play.

Pai's young-lovers' version of *Peony* was publicised as a "complete-play" (*quanben*) stage work, but in fact the story was narrated through 27 scenes arranged in three instalments that lasted in total nine hours.<sup>146</sup> This adaptation highlighted the original script's generally acknowledged theme – the pursuit of passion. Yet this theme was depicted through a different perspective that had never been used before. This is seen in two aspects: firstly, the romance between the protagonists was told in its entirety – including the heroine Du Liniang's dream, death, resurrection and the grand finale – which involved a lot of scenes that had not been staged since Ming

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<sup>144</sup> Zhang Geng and Guo Hancheng 1981: 97. However, some scholars have started to question this mainstream interpretation of the play's theme. Zhu Hengfu and Zhao Huiyang argued that the central theme of the play was actually the depiction of the protagonists' sexual desire rather than their romance on the psychological level, which they believe is an even more forceful defiance against the feudal ideological restrictions of the Ming. See Zhu and Zhao 2006: 39-40.

<sup>145</sup> For example, Sophie Volpp took pedantry as the topic for her reading of Tang's original script. See Volpp 2005.

<sup>146</sup> Chen Shizheng's 1999 version of *Peony* was dubbed a all-55 scene complete work. But strictly speaking, this 20-hour mounting cannot be called complete since many scenes were shortened and altered.

times; and secondly, the portrayal of the male protagonist Liu Mengmei was greatly enhanced through many newly added arias and acting by the male lead.

The re-editing task of the text of the play was completed by a literary team made up of accomplished drama scholars from Taiwan.<sup>147</sup> Apart from Pai himself as head of the team, the other three members were: Hua Wei, a researcher from the Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy, Academia Sinica, Taiwan; Xin Yiyun, scholar on Chinese aesthetics and philosophy, Taipei National University of Arts; and Zhang Shuxiang, a professor at the Department of Chinese Literature, National Taiwan University. Based on their careful re-reading of Tang Xianzu's original script, the team identified "love, passion" (*zhiqing*) as the new production's central theme – a theme clearly pointed out in the preface of Tang's original text – "the living may die of it (love), by its power the dead live again"; the story is a "myth of romance" (Pai 2004b: 14). At this point, the team had no intention to innovate, rather, they decided to follow and highlight this theme of passion. Pai was confident that this theme of passion would appeal to today's young audiences, because "the e-generation (young people) are also humans, and all humans have a 'myth of love' in the deepest part of their hearts that awaits to be woken" (Pai 2004b: 14).

According to Hua Wei, in order to highlight the theme of passion, the re-editing of the text was based on the following principles. Firstly, instead of ending the performance at Du Liniang's resurrection which had often been common practice,<sup>148</sup> Pai's literary team decided to narrate the romance between the protagonists in its

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<sup>147</sup> Members of the production team of Pai's *Peony* are: general producer: Pai Hsien-yung; producer: Cao Shaohua, Fan Mannong; script adaptation: Pai Hsien-yung, Hua Wei, Zhang Shuxiang, Xin Yiyun; chief director: Wang Shiyu; artistic directors: Wang Shiyu, Zhang Jiqing; director: Weng Guosheng; music arranger: Zhou Youliang; costume design: Wang Tong, Zeng Yongni; stage and lighting design: Lin Kehua; choreographer: Wu Sujun, Ma Peiling; photography: Hsu Pei-hung, calligraphy: Dong Yangzi; graphic art: Xi Song.

<sup>148</sup> A majority of the previous adaptations of *Peony* centred upon the first half of the script, and ended at the death of Du Liniang, or sometimes at her resurrection. The best-known scenes, such as "The Interrupted Dream" and "Pursuing the Dream" are both from this half of the play.

entirety. The first half of Tang's original script describes how Du wanders in her family garden on a spring day, dreams of a young scholar, after which she falls ill with longing for the love of that scholar, and dies of lovesickness. Then Liu Mengmei, the scholar, meets Du's ghost, who encourages him to dig up Du's tomb so as to help her gain resurrection. The second half of the script is about how the young couple fight for acknowledgement of their marriage – from Du's family and from society – against all odds.

Pai's team decided that the second half of the play would be indispensable for the passion theme. In fact, over twenty years ago, in a forum of Tang Xianzu researchers, the scholar Zhang Qi had already argued for the importance of the second half of the play in his essay. He insisted that without this part, the protagonists' determination to pursue their freedom to love would not be complete. Hua Wei quoted Zhang's assertion as a support for the decision of the team (Pai 2006: 124). Zhang Shuxiang believed that Du's pursuit of true love was not just a personal quest. She suggested that the love story must be put back into its social context, and that the triumph over the socio-political constraints was where the significance of the romance exists, and this was the reason why the second half of the play should be included in this new adaptation (Pai 2004a: 139).

Secondly, to explore the passion theme, all scenes not directly contributing to this topic were left out and only 27 scenes out of the original 55 were included in Pai's adaptation. These scenes were organised into three instalments, each running for three hours including an interlude. The literary team set sub-themes for each of these three instalments so that they were not only one part of the entire story, but could stand on its own as well: Book I: "The Dream of Love" (*Mengzhong qing*);

Book II: “Romance and Resurrection” (*Rengui qing*); Part III: “Reunion and Triumph” (*Renjian qing*) (Pai 2006: 125). Some scenes were rearranged so that the storyline could be narrative with more coherence and fluidity.<sup>149</sup> Take Book I as an example. “Declaring ambitions” (*yanhuai*), the second scene in the original script serving as an introduction to Liu Mengmei was placed as Scene 4 in the young-lovers’ edition right after Liu appeared in Du’s dream. It was considered a more logical place for this introduction to Liu since the first three scenes are all about Du Liniang. Another example is “The Traitor” (*ludie*), originally Scene 15, which was placed in front of Scene 14 “Painting a Portrait” (*xiezhen*), chiefly for the purpose of spicing up the stage with some brief martial stunts after the interlude while introducing the warfare background of the story in this instalment (Pai 2006: 130).

Thirdly, unlike most previous adaptations that centred on the portrayal of the heroine Du Liniang, Pai’s *Peony* significantly increased the share of the male protagonist Liu Mengmei and portrayed him as a role equally important with Du. Wang Shiyu the artistic director argued that in the original script, the description of Liu was no less than that of Du, and Liu was crucial at every step of the plot development, such as Du’s dream, resurrection, and struggle for family reunion. In the light of the passion theme of the adaptation, Wang suggested that Liu should be portrayed as a fuller image (Pai 2006: 102). Hua Wei supported this proposal, saying that the romantic relationship between Du and Liu must be revealed by the contribution of both characters (Pai 2006: 127). This shift in focus on the central characters is a very subtle change. Tang wrote in the first two paragraphs of his introduction to this play:

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<sup>149</sup> For a list of the 27 scenes in Pai’s *Peony* and their original position in Tang’s script, see Appendix 1.

Has the world ever seen a woman's love to rival that of Bridal Du?  
Dreaming of a lover she fell sick; once sick she became ever worse; and finally, after painting her own portrait as a legacy to the world, she died. Dead for three years, still she was able to live again when in the dark underworld her quest for the object of her dream was fulfilled. To be as Bridal Du is truly to have known love (Tang, trans. by Birch 1980).

These words indicated that even though many of the entire 55 scenes would deal with minor story lines, Du still would be the single most important character. The central theme was “her” love. Yet in Pai’s adaptation, the central theme has become “their” love, i.e., not just Du’s love for Liu, but Liu’s love for Du. This shift in emphasis of portrayal was made in a very skilful way so as not to run contradictory to the original theme of passion, nonetheless it indicated a new interpretation of the play.

Hua Wei pointed out that Liu Mengmei would be depicted in this adaptation as “a person longing for love” (*youqing ren*). The most indispensable scenes to depict this would be Liu’s solo acting in Book II, i.e. the scene titled “The Portrait Recovered” (*shihua*, a combination of the original scenes of “The Portrait Recovered”, *shihua* and “The Portrait Examined”, *wanzhen*). This 30-minute central aria was arranged as Liu’s solo performance to express his understanding of passion and his admiration for Du Liniang when he discovered her self-portrait in the back garden of the Du mansion. By combining the two scenes into one, the literary team intended to create a new scene that would run parallel to Du Liniang’s garden solo – both in terms of the duration of the acting and its intensity, so as to portray the male protagonist in greater detail (Pai 2006: 103).

During their discussion about the script revision, whether or not the grand finale of the original text that depicts the happy reunion of the Du family should be included in the adaptation became one of the key issues. By doing so, it seems that



this adaptation would inevitably fall into the traditional Chinese drama prototype of concluding a story with a “happy ending” (*da tuanyuan*).

Back in early twentieth century, “happy ending” was harshly criticised within the context of the introduction of western drama and reform of traditional Chinese operas. Lu Xun dismissed the “happy endings” model as an obsession closely linked with the Chinese national character: it is the revelation of Chinese people’s willingness to address similar problems in real life and their escapism from reforms (Lu Xun 2005: 309). Hu Shi’s criticism of “happy ending” strikes a similar tone. He said,

This obsession with a happy ending is the solid evidence of the weak mentality of Chinese people. The author... won’t open his eyes to face the many tragic happenings in the real world, and record them faithfully. Instead, he only seeks to compose something that pleases all. This is the liars’ literature (Hu Shi 1998: 122).

In the more recent studies on traditional Chinese operatic works, the “happy ending” model was examined within the broader social and cultural background rather than being evaluated from a Marxist ideological perspective. Zhang Aifeng (2007: 76) pointed out that the popularity of happy endings in Chinese literary works should be connected with traditional Chinese cultural reality, such as the prominent conception of “completeness” (*yuan*) in traditional Chinese philosophy, and “the beauty of harmony” (*he*) – the key values of ancient Chinese aesthetics. Such endings bear the hope of the general populace, or the audiences of these operatic works, who sometimes suffer in real life. This point exactly resonates with that of Pai’s literary team. Therefore, the team decided that the inclusion of the happy ending, i.e., Liu’s success in the imperial examination and the reunion of the newly-weds with the family, is not just necessary but crucial to drive home the assertion that “love conquers all.” It bears the good wishes of all for the young lovers in the

story, and also such a happy ending would be the wish of all lovers in the real world (Pai 2004b: 135). By doing so, they should have expected negative reviews. Liu Shuxian's comment on the ending of the young-lovers' version is representative of these reviews. He said that such an ending makes this version slip back to the beaten track of "scholars and fair maidens, emperors and ministers" (*caizi jiaren, diwang jiangxiang*);<sup>150</sup> it may satisfy the common audiences, but left him with disappointment (Liu cited in Pai 2004b: 165).

This inclusion of the happy ending in Book III entailed a substantial amount of work both in terms of script rearrangement and in the production of singing and acting. This is mainly because the scenes included in this instalment had not been performed much in the past, so there are few written records available for reference, nor is there any stage experience inherited from the senior masters. So if the script abridgement can still be viewed as faithful to the original text, the design of the performance, which is called *niexi* (literally, moulding of performance),<sup>151</sup> is in fact a process of painstaking creation, even though it was based on the masters' understanding of *kunqu* conventions.

The re-editing of the script involved not only the complete deletion of some scenes, but also considerable cutting of arias and dialogues within those scenes selected. The position of the male protagonist in Pai's *Peony* has been promoted from a supporting role into one of the two leading characters. This inevitably weakened the portrayal of the heroine Du Liniang, although the literary team promised to keep a balance between the two characters (Pai 2006: 102). In one of the

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<sup>150</sup> This is an expression that refers to the stereotypical structure that most traditional Chinese operatic works follow, and most of these works are with happy endings.

<sup>151</sup> It is a special term in *kunqu* profession that refers to the creation of new acting, dancing to match the singing and orchestra accompaniment. It is usually based on written script (sometimes with acting instructions) and the designers' own expertise and virtuosity.

most important scenes for Du's performance, "Interrupted Dream" (*jingmeng*), the following monologue is crucial for the readers and audiences to understand her self-awakening, but it is deleted from Pai's version:

...Where has Fragrance got to? (She looks around her, then lowers her head again, pondering) Ah Heaven, now I begin to realize how disturbing the spring's splendour can truly be. They were all telling the truth, those poems and ballads I read that spoke of girls of ancient times 'in springtime moved to passion, in autumn to regret.' Here am I at the 'double eight,' my sixteenth year, yet no fine 'scholar to break the cassia bough' has come my way. My young passions stir to the young spring season, but where shall I find an 'entrant of the moon's toad palace'? Long ago the Lady Han found a way to a meeting with Yu You, and the scholar Zhang met with Miss Cui by chance. Their loves are told in *Poem on the Red Leaf* and in *Western Chamber*, how these 'fair maids and gifted youths' after clandestine meetings made marital unions 'as between Qin and Jin.' (She gives a long sigh) Though born and bred of a noted line of holders of office, I have reached the age to 'pin my hair' without any plan made for my betrothal to a suitable partner. The green springtime of my own life passes unfulfilled, and swift the time speeds by as dawn and dusk interchange. (She weeps) O pity one whose beauty is a bright flower, when life endures no longer than leaf on tree! (cited from Birch's translation 1980: 46)

In another central scene for Du, "Search for the Dream" (*xunmeng*), 12 arias out of the original 20 were deleted. Although Pai and his team haven't directly explained why the above monologue and other arias were cut in these two scenes, keeping control of the length of them (both scenes are Du's solo performances) must be one of the main reasons.

This selection between inclusion and exclusion can also be seen in the team's handling of the minor scenes.<sup>152</sup> Some of these scenes were combined into major scenes with just one or two of their verses, and lost their independence altogether. Others remained under their own titles but with their content significantly reduced, they usually lasted only for two to three minutes, and functioned as interludes between major scenes. In doing so, the literary team aimed to provide the audience with some brief information of the social background, and a contrast against the

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<sup>152</sup> By minor I mean those scenes are not considered to be directly relevant to the portrayal of the leading characters. They are mainly those scenes describing the warfare background.

slow-paced narration of the romance plot. However, it seems that not everyone agreed with this rearrangement. Zheng Peikai pointed out the drawback of the arrangement of the martial scenes. He thought these abridged scenes were too short to deliver proper information, and their abrupt insertion into the major scenes only left the audiences in bewilderment. “It’s just like when you are just about to sip the wine, and someone snatched away your cup” (Zheng cited in Pai 2004b: 233).

In sum, the re-editing work by Pai and his literary team has centred on the “youth” theme. Its strong innovative characteristics were revealed in the following two respects: firstly, their reading of the play marked a departure from the traditional practice of focusing on Du Liniang, the female protagonist. With Liu Mengmei’s rise in prominence, Du shared her central stage position with him in this new adaptation, and the conflict shifted from Du’s dream and pursuit of love into the struggle of both. Secondly, the grouping of the selected scenes into three instalments, each with its own sub-themes, not only enhanced the general theme of passion, but also offered a basis for their rearrangement and the abridgement of selected scenes.

### **3.5. Stage Setting, Props and Lighting**

Pai Hsien-yung’s stage design team was formed by a group of accomplished artists from Taiwan and Hong Kong. He invited Lin Kehua, a theatre stage designer from Taiwan, to take charge of the stage design and lighting. Lin was not familiar with *kunqu* stage before this production. This partly explains why he adopted a different approach to express the aesthetic value of “simplicity” through Suzhou garden elements and something he described as the *Zen* feature. There were also

some other elements added into the scenery building on the stage, but none of them were conventional *kunqu* stage properties.

Here my analysis is based on the play's 2004 debut performance in Taipei. The stage consisted of a main area in the centre and a raised platform at its rear end, with a C-shaped ramp at the left-hand entrance corner to link these areas (see Figure 1). The contrast between the raised platform and the central stage was kept to a minimum, but the two levels had an important function to stage simultaneous happenings at different locations, sometimes even two worlds, in certain scenes. The stage front side was extended into the orchestra pit, and two shallow pits were built in this extended area, functioning as ponds. Lin explained that these ponds were built to suit the needs of Du's central scenes that were set in the garden. On both sides of the stage, there stood a grey-coloured wall that represented Suzhou garden walls.<sup>153</sup> They were built in a winding manner to show the curves found in the edge of a real garden pond and even lotus leaves that grow from the ponds.

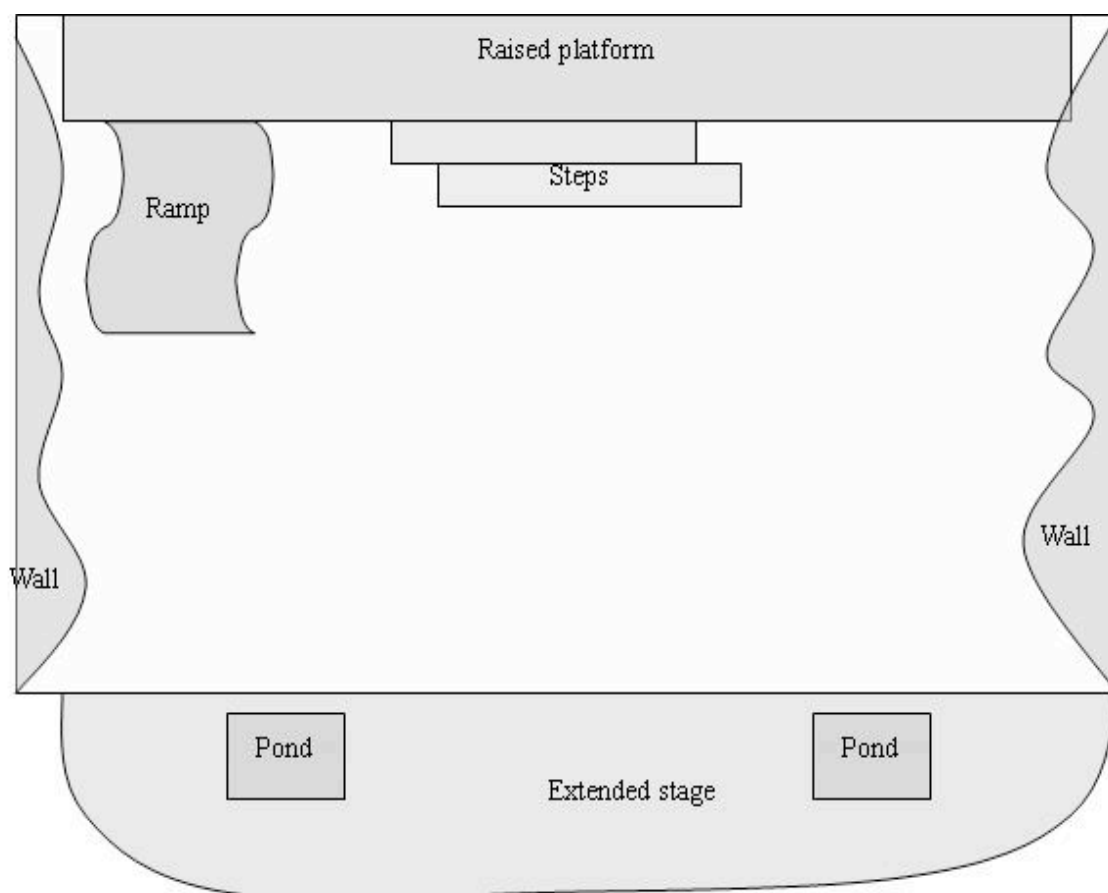
The following quote from Lin Kehua revealed his central idea on the stage design:

When I accepted this job, I presumed that the primary audiences for this production will be young people in their 20s and 30s rather than *kunqu* aficionados in their 60s or 70s. Therefore, I set a direction for my own design in allowing the simplicity that one can find in Suzhou garden construction or modern *Zen* art to be blended in the stage design for this show (Lin cited in Pai 2004b: 147).

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<sup>153</sup> The close association of Suzhou gardens and *kunqu* (both in the playwriting and stage design) has been seen throughout *kunqu* history. Some even concluded the typical structure of many *kunqu* stories as "Secret betrothal is made in the back garden; the unfortunate young scholar finally gets selected as No. 1 scholar," (*siding zhongsheng hou huayuan, luonan caizi zhong zhuangyuan*) in which gardens played a key role. Although this structure does not necessarily apply to all *kunqu* plays, it nevertheless shows how important the concept of garden once was in *kunqu* creation. The garden concept in Lin's stage design coincided with Gu Lingsen's argument. Gu called the use of garden as a "garden prototype." For more details of his argument, see Gu Linsen, 2005: 57-81.

Here Lin believed that his understanding of simplicity in Suzhou garden construction and Zen art style<sup>154</sup> would be the same concepts that Pai was seeking in the stage design and could be blended harmoniously.



**Figure 1** The stage design of Pai Hsien-yung's *The Peony Pavilion*, Taipei premiere, 2004. Graphed by the author.

In Chen Shizheng's 1999 version of *Peony*, the Suzhou garden concept was also adopted, but in a much more conspicuous way: a big wooden-roofed pavilion was installed in the central front part of the stage, and between this pavilion and the audience area a large pond was constructed, extending over the entire stage front. In the pond were fish, ducks and water plants. This is a realistic copy of a typical Suzhou garden construction. In contrast, Lin Kehua's design in Pai's version copied the garden structure in a less conspicuous way. But still, *kunqu* scholar Zheng Peikai

<sup>154</sup> The *Zen* aesthetic has profoundly influenced traditional Chinese art, especially its emphasis on simplicity and elegance.

thought that both the ponds and winding walls in Pai's *Peony* were big mistakes: "those pits were totally useless and hampered the abstractness of *kunqu* art." As for the walls, he criticised them for blocking the free space for the imagination that traditional *kunqu* performance offered to the audiences (Zheng cited in Pai 2004c: 232-233). Perhaps due to criticism of this kind, the extended stage and the walls were no longer used after the Taipei premiere. However, this doesn't change the fact that the design team once adopted some elements totally contradictory to the conventional *kunqu* stage setting's value of simplicity and abstractness. In fact, some other innovative designs were used throughout this play's world tour. These include latticed windows and screen walls as partitions of space at different scenes, an introduction which was also inspired by the garden architecture.



**Figure 2** Examples of calligraphic works and paintings in Pai's *Peony*.

**Top:** "Declaration of Ambitions." Source:

[http://blog.163.com/lange\\_leung/blog/static/10335811520099454435787/](http://blog.163.com/lange_leung/blog/static/10335811520099454435787/), accessed 28 November, 2010; **Bottom:** "The Portrait Recovered." Photo by Hsu Pei-hung.

Chinese paintings and calligraphic works by famous artists were for the first time publicized as a selling point of Pai's *Peony* (see Figure 2). For most of the time, the stage backdrop remained obscured. But when necessary, a freehand brush painting was projected onto it to help define the background of the specific scenes. For example, in "On the Road" (*lǚjī*), a Chinese ink landscape painting with mountain and water as its subject was projected onto the backdrop to indicate Liu



Mengmei's journey to the capital for the imperial examination. Du Liniang's self-portrait was a work by Taiwanese artist Xi Song (see Figure 2). If this painting was too small in size to be clearly appreciated by most audiences, the calligraphic works by another Taiwanese artist Dong Yangzi were a lot more visible on stage: these included the Chinese title of the play – “Mudan ting” – on the backdrop at the beginning and end of the performance, and the scrolls hanging on the screens in a few scenes when the concept of scholarship was relevant. Generally speaking, these paintings and calligraphic works were only used at certain relevant scenes during the performance so that they blended well into the overall stage setting.

Furthermore, at the Taipei premiere, the stage front was hung with strings of silver-coloured lanterns, all in cylindrical shape. They were arranged roughly in a row along the front ceiling, and on each string there were about three to five lanterns. The lanterns are another traditional Chinese cultural icon, but they did not appear in any later performances. This proves that there has been constant negotiation and reconsideration of whether certain elements should be included to contribute to the “traditional” quality of this stage production.

Most stage props used in Pai's *Peony* were the same as in traditional *kunqu* performances. Table and chairs were the main properties, as conventions suggest, for indoor scenes. The design team paid special attention to the choice of fabric in soft colours for the table and chair covers, with embroidery work incorporated, so that they would appear to be harmonious with the costume design. Whenever necessary, these props were used in a creative way so as to support the acting. For example, in “Hell” (*mingpan*), a square wooden table without a cover functioned as the centrepiece – the infernal judge and ghost guards used it as table, chair, stairs, wall

and so on. Then in “Frustrating the Enemy” (*zhekou*), the conflict between the rebel couple, the Jin kingdom envoy and the commissioner from the Southern Song dynasty was highly intense. Instead of following the stage set instructions from the original script, the directors decided to use only one chair – but to use it fully. As the performers moved around the stage, this chair was constantly used and its functions shifted from one situation to the next. This faithfully embodied the figurative principle in *kunqu* convention.

In most outdoor scenes, the performers’ acting was supported by peripheral objects, such as fans, books, sprigs of flowers and willow branches, a cloth bundle, a Taoist duster, and an umbrella. Additional settings were sometimes added. In “The Portrait Recovered” (*shihua*), Liu Mengmei examined Du Liniang’s portrait and sang of his love for her. A mat made of tree branches was lowered from the stage ceiling so that the portrait could be hung on it. A spotlight was set onto the portrait, and the mat remained in shade so that the audiences were hardly aware of it.

Although the use of stage props in Pai’s *Peony* should be generally defined as “conventional,” there was one particular exception that aroused dispute and harsh criticism. The leading floral god held a long rod on top of which were tied several strips of long ribbon that fluttered when the rod swayed. These fluttering ribbons were highly visible in the air, and the colours varied in different scenes. The stage director Lin Kehua explained that the basic idea behind this design was to use it as a symbol of guidance for Du’s spirit, both in her dream and the afterworld. However, this did not seem to work out the way he had expected. Wen Yuhang, the leading male singer of Chen Shizheng’s 1999 version of *Peony*, saw that the use of this rod – he calls it *fan* (pataka in Sanskrit), was a really “bad” idea because in Chinese culture

“*fan* has very strong implications, as everyone knows, that it is only used at funerals... it makes you feel really uncomfortable.” He believed that it did not fit the atmosphere of such scenes as “Interrupted Dream” (*jingmeng*) (Wen cited in Chen Yiru 2007: 213).

Yang Ming, director of the Hong Kong Traditional Chinese Culture and Art Research Society, has been very active in Chinese opera promotion in recent years. He launched an even more harsh attack on the stage setting of Pai’s *Peony* – in fact, he has held a generally negative view towards nearly every aspect of this production. Concerning the floral god’s rod, he wrote in his blog that when this prop appeared, the entire stage looked like a gloomy grave pit without any lively, bright colour, and “with the ribbons fluttering on top of the rod, one feels like a funeral was in procession on the stage.”<sup>155</sup>

In recent years, modern lighting techniques were widely adopted in *kunqu* performances, but if not applied properly, they can definitely have an adverse impact, and hamper the overall quality of the performances. Shen Yili was the leading actress in Shanghai *Kunqu* Troupe’s 1999 version of *Peony*.<sup>156</sup> When she talked about the lighting in that show, she admitted that a lot of stage lights had been used, and that caused rather too much restriction and pressure to her rehearsals and acting. For example, it was difficult for her to find her accurate position on the stage at a particular moment during the performance; when all the lights were suddenly turned off for some special effect, she could not find her way to exit the stage (Chen Yiru 2007: 215-216).

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<sup>155</sup> See Yang Ming’s blog post at <http://blog.yam.com/yeungming/article/15532003>, accessed 22 November 2010.

<sup>156</sup> After its collaboration with Chen Shizheng was aborted, the troupe produced its own 33-scene large-scale *Peony* in 1999.

In Pai's *Peony*, the lighting was used in a comparatively more restricted way. The influence of modern lighting techniques can be seen in three aspects: firstly, gentle bright light dominated most of the scenes, and strong light was seldom used. When necessary, spotlighting was adopted to pick out a single actor at a particular point of the stage to draw audiences' attention to his performance. This helped to reduce the emptiness of the stage – the size of which was much larger than a traditional stage but only decorated with very simple settings. Secondly, on a few occasions only, coloured lights were projected onto the stage floor and the backdrop as a special effect to describe the environment of that scene. In "Interrupted Dream" (*jingmeng*), the colourful lighting on the stage floor created a figurative environment of a spring garden full of blossoms. Thirdly, the whole stage became un-illuminated when a scene ended, so that stage hands could change the stage settings. This marked a clear distinction from the use of curtain fall at the same point of the play.

### **3.6. Costuming and Makeup**

Wang Tong, the costume designer of Pai's *Peony*, was known in Taiwan as a film director. Unlike the stage director Lin Kehua, Wang had developed his interest in Peking opera through his early working experiences. This personal interest, as he admitted, greatly enhanced his understanding of the key features of traditional Chinese opera, including *kunqu*. Like Pai, he also believed one should "approach *kunqu* art with awe and respect" due to its "canonical position" in Chinese culture (Wang cited in Pai 2004b: 141) In his eyes, the aesthetic values of *kunqu*, i.e., its abstractness and simplicity, occupy a great position in traditional Chinese art. Therefore, one of the aims of his costume design was to reflect these aesthetics, and

the other aim was to highlight the “youth” theme, and the “gentle quality” (*roumei*) of the original story. To achieve these goals, Wang decided that the overall tone of colouring throughout this show would be “gentle and elegant” (*danya*). Also he decided to adopt Suzhou embroidery works to decorate the costumes as well as table and chair covers. Although this entailed a substantial amount of work, it added an extra Suzhou cultural element to this show.

The refinement and gentle quality of Wang’s colour design can be best seen through the costumes of the leading actors (see Figure 3). To achieve an effect of tenderness, Wang widely used costumes in light pink, green and blue blended with light grey. He believed that by avoiding the conventional shining colours, this range of colours could help to highlight the elegance of the leading characters, and enhance the “clean, refreshing and youthful” atmosphere (Pai 2004b: 143).



**Figure 3** A comparison of costume design between Pai's *Peony* and earlier versions of the play.

**Top left:** "Interrupted Dream," 1923, Peking opera singer Cheng Yanqiu as Du Liniang and kunqu master Yu Zhenfei as Liu Mengmei. See Pai 2004a: 82;

**Bottom left:** "Wandering in the Garden," 1980s, Zhang Jiqing as Du Liniang and Xu Hua as Chunxiang. Source: <http://www.linchuan.jx.cn/zxst/ShowArticle.asp?ArticleID=334>, accessed 20 May, 2011;

**Right:** "Search for the Dream," 2004. Shen Fengying as Du Linang in Pai's *Peony*.

Costumes in Pai's adaptation are made of less shiny fabric with more tender colours, less crowded embroidery works, and are cut slimmer to highlight the performers' youthful physiques. Photo by Hsu Pei-hung.

For the supporting characters, Wang adopted brighter colours to achieve a contrasting effect. Du's maid Chunxiang was always dressed in a bright vest on top of a light-coloured garment and trousers to depict her vivacious nature in her early teens. Another example is Dame Li, the wife of the rebel. As a military figure, she was dressed in a modified version of female armour, purple in colour, and more

refined in shape to suit the performer's physique, over a bright red robe. Embellished with blue and red tassels, this costume well matched head-dress decorated with pheasant plumes and gleaming sword, and created an image of a valiant hero – although she is a rebel. Characters in their senior years, such as the parents of Du Liniang, the private tutor Chen Zuiliang, and the family gardener of Liu Mengmei, were all dressed in dark blue, reddish brown, silver grey and amber.

Most costumes were made of traditional materials, i.e., silk and satin, but they were cut into a style less loose than traditional costumes to better fit the performers' figures, especially for the young female roles. However, there are some examples of creative ways of dressing. In "Love Vows" (*mingshi*), Du's ghost wore a light blue cape. Traditionally, a cape was embellished with tassels and worn by female roles only on a ceremonial or official robe (Halson 1982: 29). This particular style of dress ran contradictory to one of the traditional *kunqu* dress codes: "An actor is allowed to wear a piece of worn costume, but never a wrong one." (*ning chuan po, bu chuan cuo*)<sup>157</sup>

Apart from the special colour and tailoring techniques, the embroidery work is another marked characteristic of the costuming in this show. These embroideries were hand-made by Suzhou artisans based on Wang Tong's designs that had special connotations. Most of Liu Mengmei's costumes were decorated with the patterns of plum blossom, orchid, bamboo, or chrysanthemum, all of which were favourite plants for ancient scholars. These designs could therefore be taken as an embodiment of his identity of being a scholar. In "The Soul Departs" (*lihun*), Du Liniang wore a

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<sup>157</sup> This has been an important code for costuming until recent decades when small changes started to take place.

white robe decorated with drifting cloud motifs, a very strong indication of her death in this scene.

If the above mentioned costume design was made in a rather discreet manner, the following examples are typical of the more conspicuous innovation in this respect. Firstly, the portrayal of the floral gods probably raised the most discussion (see Figure 4). In this young-lovers' version, 13 floral gods were played by three male and ten female actors. All of them were dressed in white gowns covered with a robe-like cloak, then a light-grey cape on top. Each one of them was in charge of one type of flower that represented one of the 12 calendar months. Traditionally, the identity of these actors was shown through the different flowers held in their hands – Mei Lanfang's performance in the middle of the last century had followed this convention. However, Wang Tong did not think this was a successful practice, and decided to make some changes to it. He had all the 12 different kinds of flowers embroidered on the performers' cloaks and capes.<sup>158</sup> The choreography of these floral gods was designed by Wu Sujun from School of Dance, Taipei National University of the Arts. Wu is known as the former leading dancer of the Cloud Gate Dancing Theatre, and co-founder and current leading dancer of Taipei Crossover Dancing Company, both institutions known for their modern dance works bearing very strong influence of traditional Chinese performing elements. Wu brought into her dance design for Pai's *Peony* her own expertise and aesthetic appreciation of these traditional elements. Wu explained that she adopted the traditional *kunqu* dance movements – this was why she insisted that all 13 characters should be played by professional *kunqu* performers;

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<sup>158</sup> In Tang Xianzu's original script, there was only one floral god, and early stage practices in late Ming and Qing had followed this allocation. But starting from mid Qing, 12 floral gods were used in the stage shows, who were played by all different roles. Then in early twentieth century, they were played by *huadan* (young female role) only. For details of this change, see Xu Fuming 1987: 173-176; Jiang Jurong in Pai 2006: 170-172.



she understood that traditional *kunqu* performances valued “pose striking” (*liangxiang*), but she was reluctant to present these actions in such an “inflexible and static” way; she insisted that her choreographic design should help to



**Figure 4** A comparison of the floral gods image between Pai's *Peony* and Mei Lanfang's version. **Top and middle:** The floral gods in Pai's *Peony*. Photo by Hsu Pei-hung; **Bottom:** "Interrupted Dream," 1959, Mei Lanfang as Du Linang and Yu Zhenfei as Liu Mengmei. See Pai 2004a: 85.

create a “dynamic, fluid atmosphere” on stage.<sup>159</sup> This was why, in her design, these floral gods appeared on stage in five scenes – in the original script, floral gods appeared in only two scenes – and they did a lot of group spinning and gliding. With all these alterations of their image-making and dancing, the floral gods in Pai’s *Peony* would be the most radically changed characters.

Secondly, the change in supporting characters can also be seen most clearly in the portrayal of the Taoist nun Sister Stone (so named because her hymen was rock-hard and impenetrable). Traditionally this character was played by a clown performer.<sup>160</sup> For many readers and audiences, the character is known for her lengthy self-introduction full of ribald words as self-mockery. But as she is a confidante to both Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei and plays a significant role in helping them finally attain consummation, the director Wang Shiyu considered that Sister Stone “should not be uglified” because of her physical handicap; instead, she “should be given sympathy and love” (Wang cited in Pai 2006: 109). Therefore, Sister Stone in Pai’s *Peony* was not played as a clown’s role, but by Tao Hongzhen, a famous *zhengdan*<sup>161</sup> singer from Jiangsu Provincial *Kunqu* Troupe. The Taoist robe worn by Sister Stone was not of a common type, but involved the use of embroidered decoration with specific connotations: her robe and vest were subtly coloured, and her identity as a nun was indicated by embroidered lotus leaves and blossoms.<sup>162</sup> A similar major alteration of role type was also applied to the character of Dame Li, the

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<sup>159</sup> See the interview with Wu Sujun in the chronicling video: Taipei Public Television, 2007.

<sup>160</sup> In Tang’s original script, this character was assigned to a “painted face” role (*Jing*), see Tang Xianzu 1965. But in most stage performances, she was played by a “clown” role (*chou*). See Yang Ming: <http://blog.yam.com/yeungming/article/15532003>, accessed 24 November, 2010.

<sup>161</sup> The *zhengdan* role is one of the several sub-categories in the female role in *kunqu*. Performers of this role play virtuous women.

<sup>162</sup> This motif denotation in fact can only be taken figuratively, because lotus has a recognized link with Buddhism rather than Taoism.

wife of the rebel. Originally she was played by a “clown” role (*chou*), but in Pai’s version, she was played by a “martial female” (*wudan*).

These changes in image portrayal attracted very little attention among the general audiences, because without having read the original script, most of them would have no idea about the allocation of these role types. Even among dramatists and critics, most comments seem to view these changes to be improvement. Li Na thinks that image alterations of this kind, together with the omission of their bawdy and coarse lines, has made these characters “better suit the overall aesthetic taste of the entire show” (i.e., refinement and elegance) (Li cited in Pai 2006: 199-202). However, Yang Ming launched a severe attack on this change. He wrote in his blog:

... *Kunqu* tradition greatly valued the strict artistic rules and the division of role types. In all *kunqu* performances, there have been clear division of role types for different characters. Sister Stone in *The Peony Pavilion* should be played by *zuodan*,<sup>163</sup> or by a *chou* (clown). The famous clown actors Liu Yilong from Shanghai and Wang Shiyao from Hangzhou are both known for their superb depiction of Sister Stone in this play. I do not understand why Pai Hsien-yung did not assign this character to Lǔ Fuhai, the accomplished No. 1 clown actor from Suzhou, but to Tao Hongzhen, one of the best *guimendan* (virtuous female)<sup>164</sup> singers. This operation is clearly against the convention, and is totally inappropriate. Some audiences even say that it is the ultimate insult to assign such a comic role to Tao, the disciple of the famous master Zhang Jiqing.<sup>165</sup> (Yang Ming 2008)

With regard to facial makeup, Pai and his team used stage photos of Peking opera master Mei Lanfang’s performance of *Peony* scenes in the 1940s and 1950s as reference.<sup>166</sup> According to Wang Tong, the actors in Mei’s version did not wear heavy makeup, nor did they use fake eyelashes or eye lines, which have been so common in opera makeup in recent years. This “low-key” practice exactly fits their

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<sup>163</sup> *Zuodan* is a sub-category of female roles. It plays the young, vivacious and comic females.

<sup>164</sup> In this term, *wu* is for the Chinese character “five” (just the number allocated to this sub-category of female roles in *kunqu*), whereas in another term *wudan*, *wu* stands for the character “martial arts.”

<sup>165</sup> Tao Hongzhen was also taken by Zhang Jiqing as one of her personal disciples in the 2003 ceremony initiated by Pai.

<sup>166</sup> Mei Lanfang’s acting in *The Peony Pavilion* was even made into an opera film in 1960, which is still considered to be one of the best opera films from the middle of the twentieth century.

production principle of “not letting stage settings and costuming obscure the actors’ performances” (Wang cited in Pai 2004b: 144).

### 3.7. Music – Singing and Orchestration

In *kunqu*, the actors’ singing and the orchestration accompaniment are considered the two key elements that distinguish it from other traditional operatic genres, so the handling of the music in any *kunqu* production is always taken as an important criterion to judge whether it has retained traditional *kunqu* music features. In Pai’s *Peony*, Zhou Youliang, music director and composer from Suzhou *Kunqu* Troupe, was invited to take charge of the music creation. To Zhou, the real challenge of his work was “how to be consistent with traditional *kunqu* music convention, but meanwhile to make this new adaptation distinctive from other editions of this masterpiece play.” Zhou acknowledged that the vocal music in *kunqu* is rigidly restricted by the “labelled melodies” (*qupai*),<sup>167</sup> but meanwhile he also saw the importance and necessity of change in the development of *kunqu* music, because “stage performance is vastly different from “pure singing” (*qingchang*),<sup>168</sup> and stage directors and actors sometimes will ask for changes on melodies and tempos based on their stage experiences” (Zhou cited in Pai 2006: 145). This quotation reveals that as a *kunqu* musician Zhou sees the needs for change and innovation in *kunqu* music in a new stage production.

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<sup>167</sup> In *kunqu*, each section of the arias has its own “fixed melodies,” which sets a fixed pattern for the music composition of this section.

<sup>168</sup> The “pure singing” has mainly been practised by amateur *kunqu* singers as mentioned in Chapter 1, most of whom were literary men. This type of singing requires no make-up or physical acting. It is considered one of the two major *kunqu* practices – the other being stage performances.

The music design for Pai's *Peony* has the following features: firstly, for all those signature arias that had been most constantly staged along this play's history, such as "Interrupted Dream" (*jingmeng*) and "Search for the Dream" (*xunmeng*), Zhou left the music unchanged. All he did for these arias was to add some background music to fill in the prelude, intermezzo and postlude of each "labelled melody." Besides, tunes from these well-known arias were adopted to set the overall music feature of the entire work. For those arias that have been less performed in the past, some changes were made; for those segments without any musical notations passed down either through oral teaching or written records, Zhou had to compose the music from scratch according to the traditional modes and metrical types used in Book I. Overall, special attention was taken to manipulate the tempo of the entire work to ensure the clear articulation of each syllable in the actors' aria lines, which was typical of *kunqu* singing, and to support the depiction of each character's mood during their performances.

Secondly, the composer provided some aural variety to the show through an enriched orchestration and the repetition of certain keynote music pieces. Many of Du Liniang's arias were introduced or underlined by a well-known "labelled melody" titled *Zaoluopao* (literally "black gauze robes")<sup>169</sup> from her most important scene "Interrupted Dream" (*jingmeng*), so this becomes one of the keynote themes. In contrast, the keynote music from the many songs performed by Liu Mengmei is the "labelled melody" *Shantaohong* (literally "red peach blossoms") taken from the same scene. Zhou also used a single "theme tune" to start each instalment, and a choral singing as a conclusion. At the end of Book I, when Du Liniang dies, the

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<sup>169</sup> This melody is arguably the single best known set of music tunes from this play. Most *kunqu* learners, no matter professionals or amateurs, would start from this aria.

following line was repeatedly sung by a group of singers backstage: “How can the moon, once set, rise again, or the burnt-out lamp grow red?”<sup>170</sup> At the end of both Book II and Book III, the choral line changed into: “Let me only keep faith with the history of this longing, of the road that led through three incarnations to the peony pavilion.”<sup>171</sup> These theme tunes haven’t been used in any previous versions of this play. Zhou considered it crucial to enhance the leitmotif of this adaptation: the pursuit of true love.

Thirdly, the orchestration was enriched by the use of some modern instruments which are considered not conventional for *kunqu* performance. For this change, Zhou explained that without variety of musical tones and the alteration between soft and strong music, such a nine-hour long play would be very boring for the audiences. (Taiwan Public TV 2007) Therefore, on the one hand, traditional *kunqu* orchestration was used throughout the entire play, and the singing was mostly underpinned by a choral accompaniment played by the horizontal flute (*di*), the single most important instrument in conventional *kunqu* performance. On the other hand, the composer added some special instruments wherever he saw necessary. These included *gaohu* (high-pitched two-stringed fiddle),<sup>172</sup> *xiao* (vertical flute), *guzheng* (Chinese zither), *bianzhong* (chime bells), *tiqin* (cello and violin), *xun* (Chinese ocarina),<sup>173</sup> *pipa* (Chinese lute, four-stringed) and *erhu* (Chinese two-stringed fiddle). For most scenes, the music accompaniment consisted of soft strains played by the conventional instruments. When there is group dance, or more exciting performances, such as the military scenes, and the most compelling moments in “Resurrection” (*huisheng*) and

<sup>170</sup> This line is taken from one of Du’s arias before her death. It expresses her longing for incarnation.

<sup>171</sup> This line is taken from Scene 1 of the original play text. It indicates the protagonists’ determination of pursuing their perfect love through the trials and tribulation.

<sup>172</sup> *Gaohu* was developed in 1920s as a variant instrument of *erhu*. It is smaller in shape and has a higher pitch.

<sup>173</sup> *Xun* is a egg-shaped, flute-like wind instrument made of ceramic or clay. It is one of the most ancient Chinese musical instruments.

“Reunion at Court” (*yuanjia*), all instruments and percussions joined together to provide a magnificent and passionate accompaniment.

About his music creation in this play, Zhou Youliang concluded that “from my personal experience during the touring performances, the singing and orchestral music of this production have played a very significant role for its sensational reception...the general impression of this play for many audiences was ‘young’ and ‘pleasant to hear’...” (in Pai 2006: 147).

### **3.8. Conclusion**

The production of Pai’s *Peony* has been vastly distinctive from all other *kunqu* productions in recent years. This can be seen from the following two aspects: firstly, Pai situated his vision of preserving *kunqu* in the discourse of Chinese traditional cultural revival. This not only helped to win government endorsement of the collaboration between the artists and scholars across the Strait; it also helped to attract private sponsorship and a large group of volunteers who looked up to Pai for his aspiration. Furthermore, it was utilized as an important catchword in the publicity campaign to win the support of audiences.

Secondly, the production team followed their own standard of negotiating between tradition and innovation. Pai claimed that his production would be an authentic work, but my analysis on different aspects of the production presented in this chapter points to the fact that changes have been made in virtually every single aspect of the production and the *kunqu* art as seen in this work is actually an “invented tradition.” It is a combination of different people’s interpretation of the original script as well as the aesthetics values of *kunqu* art. All the changes and

innovations were justified by the needs to bring *kunqu* art onto the modern stage so as to attract young audiences, which in turn is crucial for the revival of *kunqu* as cultural heritage and the most representative form of traditional Chinese art. Actually Pai's vision in this project was not restricted to the establishment of *kunqu* as the truly representative operatic genre from China, he also hoped that this recognition could serve as the prelude to the revival of traditional Chinese culture in this new century.

Obviously Pai was not the first person to mount *Peony* as a “complete-play” stage work by incorporating both traditional and innovative elements into the production. But his production seems to be the first that has been so enthusiastically received by an unprecedented number of audiences – a majority of whom were young people. This fact has shed some useful light on our understanding of the current landscape of *kunqu* production and consumption both inside and outside China. Pai's production was characterized by the collaboration between *kunqu* professionals from the PRC and artistic experts from Taiwan and Hong Kong. However, these artists from outside the *kunqu* circle seem to have played a leading role in the production process, and their interpretations have brought new elements (non-*kunqu* elements) and altered the overall image of this play as a *kunqu* work.

Pai set his own parameters for the negotiation between tradition and innovation. He and his production team embraced changes and innovation. Their active exploration of the potential market set them apart from a few conservative *kunqu* proponents, such as Lou Yulie and Zhang Weidong, who strongly oppose innovation of any kind as they do not see the need to develop a new audience, as *kunqu* is a kind of cultural heritage and should be restored to its original form, protected like



historical relics and exhibited to the public in the museum.<sup>174</sup> They are also set apart from those more progressive proponents who generally embrace changes and innovation but have not found out any effective means to solve the problems that confront today's *kunqu*, especially the problem of a diminishing audience population. These distinct attitudes towards *kunqu*'s relationship with its audiences and innovation in its production actually lie at the core of the dispute over the different approaches of *kunqu* preservation. It is Pai who has made this groundbreaking effort – taking the audience issue as the starting point. This mode of production, as has been proved within the last few years, has exerted great impact on *kunqu* production within China, which will be discussed in the last chapter of this dissertation.

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<sup>174</sup> See Zhang Weidong 2004b; Lou Yulie, 2007.

## CHAPTER FOUR    The Publicity and Consumption of Pai Hsien-yung's *Peony* as Cultural Heritage

From 2004 to 2009, Pai Hsien-yung's new adaptation of the *kunqu* classic *The Peony Pavilion* toured mainland China, Taiwan and some Western countries: it was staged nearly 200 times, and received a phenomenal reception at almost every single stop.<sup>175</sup> The popularity of this play immediately became a topic for heated debate among the general public, and was dubbed by the press as a “*Peony* Phenomenon.” In terms of the long performance tour and the substantial number of audiences drawn to all these shows, this play stands without dispute head and shoulders above all previous *kunqu* productions. This is indeed a very impressive achievement in the present-day Chinese context in which most traditional operas struggle simply to exist. Therefore, this achievement has good reason to draw public attention and seems to have problematized the pessimistic assumptions prevalent among many Chinese dramatists and scholars who take the loss of *kunqu* audiences as an irreversible trend in today's Chinese drama market.

In contrast to the overwhelmingly positive comments about Pai's *Peony*, there have been only a few contending voices which questioned whether the high production costs involved and its wide publicity were truly justified. The conspicuous imbalance between these two contending stances is revealing to our understanding of the reception of traditional operas both inside and outside of China. The imbalance notwithstanding, it is exactly this debate that shows us how a

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<sup>175</sup> This is an updated figure as of December 2009. For a full list of the play's touring performances between 2004 and 2009, see Appendix 3.

favourable condition for *kunqu* revival and development had been created after it had been proclaimed in 2001 as cultural heritage by UNESCO: this fact provided the catalyst for the growth of a number of hybrid *kunqu* production approaches which I will discuss in the next chapter.

The key issue worthy of scrutiny in our discussion concerns how this “*Peony Phenomenon*” was created. It is thus important to go beyond the surface and question the play’s relatively long-lived popularity (compared to other contemporary *kunqu* stage works) among such a wide range of audiences across the world: what has drawn these audiences into the theatre for an operatic genre which is on the wane in the first place? What elements in this production appeal to them? And in what ways did they benefit from the experience of attending the opera? In the first two sections of this chapter, I will examine the publicity campaign for Pai’s *Peony* during which both *kunqu*’s designated position as cultural heritage and Pai’s fame as a literary celebrity were deftly highlighted as the selling points of this production, and meanwhile modern mass media techniques were adopted as instruments to maximize the publicity effects. In order to form a full picture of the critical discourses, I will analyse opposing reviews of the publicity campaign, such as the debate over who has the right to become involved in *kunqu* production, and who are entitled to be real audiences for *kunqu*. Then, in the remaining sections, I will analyse the consumption of this play by looking at its campus tours and performances in commercial theatres respectively. A separate discussion will focus on PRC official discourse in which this play was utilized as a medium for the country’s cultural promotion campaign worldwide, and as a reward, this play’s rise to fame was greatly accelerated. I then conclude with a brief discussion of how Pai’s *Peony* is distinctive from other *kunqu*

productions both in terms of its marketing, its multiple functions among the diversified audience groups within different social and cultural contexts, and its possible significance for other *kunqu* production practices that would follow this work.

The performance reviews and comments I will analyse in this chapter are taken from three main sources: firstly, the several books edited by Pai between 2004 and 2006 include critiques by leading dramatists and *kunqu* scholars from Taiwan, Hong Kong and the mainland which can be taken as representative of views from Chinese drama circles. Secondly, research papers (both in Chinese and English language) from academic journals, and performance reviews from newspapers and news websites form a framework in which a wider range of audiences' viewpoints are available. The third category of comments is mainly from website forums, BBS and personal blogs. This offers us a valuable opportunity to gain access to an even wider range of viewpoints, particularly those of young people, and interestingly, the voices of dissent are always to be found on the internet.

#### **4.1. Cultural China, Chineseness, Cultural Identity and Soft Power**

##### ***Cultural China***

Before starting the analysis on the tour performances, the definition of several terms should be clarified. In this chapter, I will borrow Tu Wei-ming's well-known concept of "cultural China" as I discuss the consumption of Pai's *Peony*. In Tu's theory, "cultural China" encompasses three cultural universes: the first being societies populated predominantly by ethnic Chinese, such as mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore; the second being overseas Chinese

communities; and the third consisting of intellectuals and professionals generally concerned with the Chinese world (Tu 1991: 22). This framework, as we can see, encompasses all those who have a similar interest in Chinese culture, irrespective of their ethnic and political background.

Within the last few years, Pai's *Peony* has reached all three universes in this cultural China framework. An examination of the audience reception throughout all three layers of this framework will enable us to see how traditional Chinese performing art such as *kunqu* can possibly negotiate a place in a global market that has been profoundly transformed by modernization.

### ***Chineseness***

Due to the unsettled dispute over the unity of China, there have been various kinds of "Chineseness" in terms of ideology and politics. Whether or not the construct of Chineseness should be taken as a legitimate theory has been contended for years.<sup>176</sup> The political and ethnic domain of Chineseness has been strenuously discussed regarding the dispute of including diasporic communities. However, if checked in the cultural dimension, this term seems to be more inclusive. Daphne Lei observes that in this new century, "a globally sanctioned Chineseness is at work to represent all Chinese on the world stage" (Lei 2006: 7-8). In this chapter, I will use the term "Chineseness" to reflect this broad representation as Lei argues so as to put the discussion into the trans-national context rather than keeping it to the restriction of territorial China. This term should be understood as a symbolic paradigm, and its inclusiveness is what we need for our discussion in this case study.

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<sup>176</sup> Examples of the questioning of the theoretical inadequacies of Chineseness can be found at Ray Chow 1998: 1-24; Ien Ang 1998:223-242; and Allen Chun 1996: 111-138.

Fitzpatrick defines identity as “points of reference whereby persons (or a group) define themselves in relation to the world and to other people: an awareness by persons (or a group) of who they are and where they belong” (Fitzpatrick 1987: 8). The construction of one’s identity in a host society is in a constant state of fluidity. Further, cultural elements from the homeland – both from their own memories and brought to them at different points – play a significant role in this construction process.

In the case of Pai’s *Peony*, the identity of Chineseness, embodied by those traditional cultural traits in this *kunqu* production, was recognized by Chinese audiences no matter where they are from. Chineseness was expressed as the key feature of the heritage from China, and a representation of Chinese culture and performing art; it aroused a feeling that Pai called “nostalgic”<sup>177</sup> and it essentially links these individuals to their homeland of China (either real or imagined). In order to construct this “Chineseness,” Pai not only adopted all those *kunqu* conventions that he considered crucial, but also some traditional cultural icons such as embroidery, calligraphic works and paintings that do not originally belong to the *kunqu* stage. He believed that this combination would “greatly enhance the Chinese style of elegance” (Pai 2006: 85).

### ***Cultural Identity***

Stuart Hall elaborates that the concept of “cultural identity” refers to one shared culture, and a sort of collective “one true self” that reflects the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes that people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. It provides these people with stable, unchanging and

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<sup>177</sup> Pai has asserted many times that one of the reasons for the popularity of his play was that it aroused a kind of cultural nostalgia among the audiences. For example, see Pai 2006: 96.

continuous frames of reference and meaning. Hall also points out that this term recognizes that there are also critical points of deep and significant differences that constitute “what we really are,” or “what we have become”, and in this sense, cultural identity is also a matter of “becoming’ as well as “being” (Hall 1990: 223, 225).

From the consumption of Pai’s *Peony*, we see the pursuit of cultural identity both by the Chinese within PRC and the diasporic communities. China has made tremendous economic progress since its opening-up and reform in the last three decades or so. It is now the wish of both the government and the general public to construct and consolidate a universally recognized national cultural identity to match its rising image in the world. On the other hand, the response of Chinese diasporas towards Pai’s *Peony* reveals how they could deal with the issue of cultural identity in a distinct discourse, and how they relate themselves to both the home countries and their host countries.

Pai’s *Peony* is a work from the cultural homeland of China that evokes “cultural memory” among the diasporic Chinese community in a nostalgic way. Through this operatic work, members of the community found a shared cultural trait which linked them to each other and also related them to the homeland of China. Their consumption of this play encapsulates this link and demonstrates the power of cultural identity among diasporic communities. This play has served to consolidate this identity. Also, this play’s appeal among its heterogeneous audiences has shed light on the solution to the issue of identity crisis among Chinese on the mainland brought about by the deepening of internationalization and the continuous flow of the diaspora population.

## ***Soft Power***

“Soft power” is a concept coined by Harvard professor Joseph Nye in 1990. Originally an international relations theory, it is now popularly used not just in international politics, but also many other fields. Nye defined “soft power” as the ability of a nation to get what it wants through attractions, rather than coercion, such as culture, political values and foreign policies. He argued that “If [a state’s] culture and ideology are attractive, other will more willingly follow.” (Nye 1990: 167) In Nye’s definition, culture is an important source for one’s soft power. Chinese scholars have termed the attractive, assimilative and influencing power of a culture as “cultural soft power” (*wenhua ruanshili*). Some of them even believe that soft power equates cultural soft power.<sup>178</sup>

As the rapid growth of economic strength is only one side of China’s rising in the world, the PRC government has been striving to increase its international influence by fostering its soft power and lifting its national image. In these endeavours, cultural export is one important means. Since 2007 when Chinese President Hu Jintao told the 17<sup>th</sup> Communist Party Congress that China needed to increase its soft power, PRC has taken soft power development as part of its national development strategy. This policy has not changed since then. Chinese premier Wen Jiabao stated in his government work report on the 2010 National People’s Congress that China will attach more importance to cultural development, and conduct cultural exchanges with foreign countries more actively, so as to enhance the international influence of Chinese culture.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> For more details about Chinese scholarship on soft power, see Wang Xuefeng 2010.

<sup>179</sup> See “How to improve China’s soft power?” at <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90776/90785/6916487.html>. A conference on China’s soft power held at Harvard University Institute of Politics in April 2006 serves as a good source to help us understand Western



This particular discourse of soft power pursuit would enable us to understand why Pai Hien-yung's *Peony* would be closely involved in PRC government's endeavours for cultural exportation and would get its strong endorsement during its world tours. For example, it was heralded in China's mainstream media as "successful promotion of Chinese culture" and "very successful cultural diplomacy between China and the U.S." at the conclusion of its American tours (Shen Yueming 2007).

#### 4.2. The Publicity Campaign

That Pai's *Peony* could tour so extensively throughout the world is due to the generous financial sponsorship from a group of private donors as well as the all-round promotion campaign in which mass media advertising was fully utilized and the notion of celebrity was also used as a selling point.

Traditionally, a playbill title of a stage work would consist of the title of the play and the leading singers' names. Yet, the wording of much publicity material for Pai's *Peony* is very distinctive: the most commonly used construction of these titles would be: "Pai Hsien-yung's young lovers' version of *The Peony Pavilion*" – i.e. Pai's name, the "youth" theme, and the title of the play form the three key elements. The wording of some other titles was a little different, but all invariably included Pai's name, such as "Pai's youth dream," or "Pai's *kunqu* journey," etc.<sup>180</sup> Obviously, both Pai's own name and the youth theme were highlighted as the selling points of this stage production. The two leading singers' names were not listed simply because

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scholars' perception of China's promotion of its culture and investment in soft power. For more information on this conference, see

[http://www.iop.harvard.edu/JFKJrForumArchive/transcripts/04192006\\_The\\_Rise\\_of\\_Chinas\\_Soft\\_Power.pdf](http://www.iop.harvard.edu/JFKJrForumArchive/transcripts/04192006_The_Rise_of_Chinas_Soft_Power.pdf).

<sup>180</sup> Illustrations of such titles can be found in Pai 2006: 87-95.

at this point both of them were in a state of obscurity, which would later be replaced by stardom yet only after this play was known to the public. The contribution of Pai's own fame to this publicity campaign was doubled by his physical appearance in front of the camera on numerous promotion campaigns, both on stage and off. Throughout the entire performing tour, except in a few instances, people could not only see him on promotional lectures, news conferences, workshops, seminars, but also at the curtain calls.

This carefully orchestrated strategy brought a lot of young people, especially Pai's faithful readers, into the theatre. This explains why from many press photos we see that Pai often signed autographs for packed audiences. Similarly to the celebrity endorsement that would more effectively boost potential customers' interest and ticket purchasing intentions than if the show used non-celebrity endorsers, Pai's special position in the publicity campaign greatly enhanced the audiences' interest and thus served as a very positive advertisement to attract potential audiences for this play.

However, Pai does not see his own fame as the sole reason drawing audiences to the theatre. He explains in a TV interview that "my fame might have attracted them, but I believe the real reason that keeps them sitting for nine hours should be the play itself."<sup>181</sup> He would rather be regarded as a volunteer promoter who devoted his time and efforts to the development of *kunqu* art (Pai 2006: 89). In fact, whenever possible, Pai would make real endeavours to articulate his vision of promoting *kunqu* as cultural heritage and emphasize the significance of this promotion. It was precisely this aspiration and enthusiasm that won him the support of many

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<sup>181</sup> From "Mian dui mian: qingchun nianxiang", China Central Television News channel, 20 May 2007. Pai also expressed this idea in my interview with him, see Appendix 4.

benefactors and volunteers that include many renowned university professors, dramatists, scholars and successful entrepreneurs. These supporters call themselves the “*kunqu* party” (*kunqu dang*).<sup>182</sup> They share Pai’s sense of social responsibility, and agree that *kunqu* is the representation of Chinese performing arts and should be promoted on the world stage. Yu Zhiming,<sup>183</sup> one of the major sponsors of this play’s world tour, sees this particular stage production as a meaningful cultural project, and considers it to be his “honour and luck” to follow Pai and work with him as a sponsor. Liu Shangjian and Chen Yizhen,<sup>184</sup> another two patrons, observe that in recent years, Western culture and ideology have successfully tapped into the Chinese cultural market, Chinese are alienated from their own traditional culture and to reverse this trend, *kunqu* can be used as a good tool (Taiwan Public TV 2007). Like them, many promoters consider it valuable to promote *kunqu* as a symbol of Chinese culture and its rejuvenation can be linked to the revival of Chinese cultural traditions. Once clearly articulated, this vision also earned support from a wide range of general public.

Pai’s leading position was acknowledged by most critics and audiences. He Xilai, the deputy director of the Research Institute of Literature, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, described Pai as the indispensable “soul” of this production: as “the commander” of a “first-class team”, he was the initiator, general producer, and commander in charge of production team recruitment, raising capital and organising performance tours (He cited in Pai 2006: 150-153).

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<sup>182</sup> See “Jie yuan Kunqu mo xiangfu, Mudan ting qi san sheng lu”, *Beijing Youth Daily*, 28 October 2004.

<sup>183</sup> Yu Zhiming is Director of Digital Heritage Publishing Ltd, Hong Kong.

<sup>184</sup> Liu Shangjian (Richard Sheng Chien Liu), Chairman of Superior Holdings Ltd. (Hong Kong) and Chen Yizhen (Jenny Chung), Co-founder of Trend Micro Co. Ltd. (Taiwan) jointly sponsored the play’s American tours. See Wu Xinlei & Pai Hsien-yung 2007: 88.

Suzhou University professor Zhu Donglin held a similar view yet particularly emphasized Pai's contribution to the facilitation of the play performance:

With his ingenious strategy, aesthetic standard and organizing capability, Pai Hsien-yung played a central and decisive role in the successful plan and performance of the young-lovers' version of *Peony*. This has been praised by all. It is also without doubt that his outstanding literary creation and his great influence in the cultural circle and among (his readers in) the colleges and universities have greatly promoted the publicity of this play among the young audiences, particularly the college students. It can be said that he represents the "soul" of the team during the play's performance tour (cited in Pai 2006: 182).

Chinese dramatist Zhang Yihe even considered Pai to be the only saviour of *kunqu* art by asserting that "Pai Hsien-yung has made a tremendous contribution to *kunqu* development. If he leaves, *kunqu* will die immediately, so we should highly compliment his young-lovers' version of *Peony*."<sup>185</sup>

The available comments and criticisms on Pai's central position in the production and publicity of *Peony* can be classified into two divergent categories, and the key issue in dispute is whether *kunqu* really needs further development, and if so, who is entitled to carry out the development and is capable of doing so.

Firstly, all those who are supportive of *kunqu* development and innovation lauded Pai's contribution. In their opinion, Pai is the mainstay of this particular production; he is the trailblazer who found a new way of developing *kunqu*. The aforementioned views of He Xilai and Zhu Donglin represent this stance on the mainland, while similar comments were made by prominent Taiwan and Hong Kong drama critics.<sup>186</sup> Cai Shaohua, Director of Suzhou *Kunqu* Troupe, asserts that "it was this project led by Pai that helped the mainland *kunqu* professionals to fulfil their dream – the dream of exploring a new way of developing *kunqu* in this new century"

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<sup>185</sup> See "Zhuanfang Zhang Yihe: Pai Hsien-yung likai, kunqu mashang wandan" at <http://book.yzdsb.com.cn/system/2010/07/26/010612785.shtml>, accessed 10 December 2010.

<sup>186</sup> Examples include reviews by Xu Zhuoyun, Zeng Yongyi, Fu Lizhong, etc. from Taiwan and Zheng Peikai from Hong Kong. See Pai 2004c: 151 onward.

(Taiwan Public TV 2007). Comments that strike a similar tone have been stated by the majority of renowned critics and dramatists, which exerted a dominant influence among the general public.

Secondly, conservationists overtly questioned Pai's involvement in *kunqu* production. Gu Duhuang, a "hard-core" conservationist who has been striving to conserve *kunqu* art for many years and was supportive of the efforts to construct a new audience base, acknowledged Pai's immense interest in *kunqu* but meanwhile considered Pai to be a "layman" who doesn't know about real *kunqu*.<sup>187</sup> Peking University professor Lou Yulie simply opposed any kind of development in *kunqu* art (Lou Yulie 2007). The most harsh accusations were probably those of Zhu Fu and Yang Ming.<sup>188</sup> Zhu bitterly resented the involvement of many "outsiders" in *kunqu* stage production, and blamed the 2001 UNESCO proclamation of *kunqu* as cultural heritage as the direct reason for a serious degradation of *kunqu* development in recent years; Yang Ming, on the other hand, clearly warned that one should not be misled by Pai's production strategy used in his *Peony*, as it was only his "self-indulgence" and could never be taken as the direction for *kunqu* preservation.<sup>189</sup>

Yu Shaohua from the Chinese University of Hong Kong launched a severe attack on the marketing strategy of Pai's play. When warning people not to abuse cultural heritage, he raised Pai's *Peony* as an example, criticising the fact that this play was "overtly commercially packaged in favour of attracting young audiences so as to make profit." Immediately after this, Pai published a response in the same

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<sup>187</sup> See Xianyu Zheng, "Kunqu suixiang (I)", at [http://www.sinovision.net/index.php?module=newspaper&act=details&col\\_id=332&news\\_id=34711](http://www.sinovision.net/index.php?module=newspaper&act=details&col_id=332&news_id=34711), accessed 10 December, 2010.

<sup>188</sup> Zhu Fu is a *kunqu* historian and musician known for his conservative stance. Yang Ming is Director of Hong Kong Traditional Chinese Culture and Art Research Society.

<sup>189</sup> See Yang Ming's blog post "Ping qingchun ban linian deshi" at <http://blog.yam.com/yeungming/article/15532003>, accessed 11 December 2010.

newspaper to clarify his intentions in producing this play, stating that “the purpose of creating this performance was to revive the art of *kunqu*, and the educational effect was the primary goal. We have never taken material gains as our aim, so we needn’t package this play commercially.”<sup>190</sup> Yu Shaohua did not specify what aspects of Pai’s publicity he considered to be “highly commercially packaged”, but it’s important to note that Pai indeed adopted many modern marketing approaches that had never been used before to promote the sales of other *kunqu* plays. I argue that these strategies were of great significance for the play’s overall sales achievement. The remainder of this section is a brief analysis of these marketing strategies.

That the publicity of Pai’s *Peony* is different from conventional *kunqu* marketing can be seen from two aspects: firstly, the all-round promotional activities permeate deeply into daily public life, especially through virtual worlds on the internet. A stream of information provided through a mix of multi-media combining print, TV, radio, and internet was available to potential audiences; secondly, there were also lectures, workshops, and seminars to offer the public additional information both about *kunqu* and the production of this play. Obviously all these activities were not just for the purposes of publicizing this particular *kunqu* production, but also an indispensable part of Pai’s project of traditional cultural and aesthetic education. Those conferences were often organized during the play’s performance seasons and were attended by renowned dramatists and scholars, and in most cases, the themes of these events were about *kunqu* preservation.<sup>191</sup> All these

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<sup>190</sup> See “Youguan qingchun ban Mudan ting de yinyue ji qita” at <http://mingkok.buddhistdoor.com/cht/news/d/3153>, accessed 11 December 2010.

<sup>191</sup> These conferences and forums include: “Tang Xianzu and Mudan ting” conference held in Taipei in April 2004 (see Hua Wei 2005. This conference was attended by Chinese drama scholars from all over the world, and was convened at the same time of the premiere of Pai’s *Peony*.); the round table forum held in Peking University on 9 April, 2005 (see Pai 2006: 242); the forum held in Beijing Normal University in April 2005 (see Pai 2006: ); the Suzhou University conference held on 7 and 8 July 2005 (see

promotional activities, together with Pai's fame, created high expectations for the play well before the actual performances took place at different stops on its performance tours. Following this, the post-show news coverage, reviews and comments, as well as audiences' word-of-mouth recommendations generated a sort of snowball effect that contributed to further publicity and an accumulation of the play's fame.

In fact, the approach of combining marketing of *kunqu* production with aesthetic education had been adopted by mainland *kunqu* troupes before. In the 1990s, *kunqu* artists from the Northern *Kunqu* Troupe had already tried to bring *kunqu* lectures and performances into colleges and universities in Beijing, but due to the lack of funding, according to the former director Wang Yunming, their activities were restricted to a very limited scale, so as a result their endeavours had not produced any significant effect comparable to that created by Pai's *Peony* (Song Heying 2010).

This brings us to an examination of the source of funding for Pai's *Peony*. The major source of funding for the production of this play and for its publicity and performing tours was not from Chinese government subsidies but mainly from the donations made by several entrepreneurs from Taiwan and Hong Kong. The mainland tours were sponsored by The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation (Peter L. S. Shiu); the Californian tour was sponsored by Trend Micro Co. Ltd. (Taiwan),<sup>192</sup> Superior Holdings Ltd. Hong Kong, and the Richard Liu Foundation. Trend Micro also co-sponsored the team's European tour together with the Chinese central

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[http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_4d70d5510100g2hj.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4d70d5510100g2hj.html)); the *Kunqu* and *Peony Pavilion* international conference held in Beijing between 8 and 11 October 2007 (see Zhang Jing 2008); and also the conference held in UC Berkeley in September 2006 (see Pai 2006 *Union Daily*).

<sup>192</sup> For the U.S. performance tour, the company set up a dedicated foundation: Trend Micro/Peony Pavilion Arts Foundation.

government. All these sponsors held a similar view that *kunqu* was an art form that was worthy of being promoted and introduced to the rest of the world (Taiwan Public TV 2007).

Two approaches during the publicity deserve special attention: one is the publication of several books related to this play and the release of some audio-visual products, and the other is the use of digital media. Neither of these approaches had been adopted for any single previous *kunqu* production. Between 2004 and 2006, Pai edited several books which were published both in Taiwan and the mainland. These books offer great detail about the production process and a collection of performance reviews from Taiwan, Hong Kong and the mainland.<sup>193</sup> These richly illustrated books provided a valuable addition to the information about this play and contributed to the expansion of the potential audience base. In 2007, to celebrate its hundredth performance, a set of DVD recordings of the complete show entitled “The hundredth *Peony*” (*Mudan yibai*) and a documentary disc chronicling the details of the play’s production process with interviews of the cast and crew and many volunteers and patrons were released. These digital products were purchased by many people who had attended the play as souvenirs together with the stage photo collections, and they are available at each performance venue and online. As by-products of the performances, all these printed and digital materials can significantly extend the life cycle of this play beyond the live performances and can bring the circulation of the information, both about this play and the cultural heritage preservation project, together with the performance itself, to a much wider range of audiences and readers.

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<sup>193</sup> These books include: *Cha zi yan hong Mudan ting* (2004a), *Pai Hsien-yung shuo Kunqu* (2004b), *Mudan huanhun* (2004c), *Yuan meng* (2006), this last book being an excerpt edition of another three books published in Taiwan in 2005: *Jing meng/xun meng/yuan meng*; *Qu gao he zhong*.



Digital media were also fully used during the publicity campaigns, and this made information about this play and *kunqu* art available to many more audiences. Within this range, we notice that the audiences have also played a significant role in information dissemination largely through their use of the internet. A blog named “Pai Hsien-yung young-lovers’ version of *Peony*” (*Pai Hsien-yung qingchun ban mudan ting*) was launched on China’s internet portal [www.sina.com](http://www.sina.com) in 2007. There are also several online discussion forums and BBS devoted to the play.<sup>194</sup> The major cast members also run their own blogs. All these websites became prime venues where Pai and his team shared the latest on and off stage information about this play with audiences, creating an “alternative” communication space within which the audiences could exchange information and express opinions about the play with a high level of interaction. Through the posts and comments in the blogs mentioned above, Pai’s audiences gained an increased amount of interactivity. The audiences, who were traditionally on the “receiving end” of the performance reception process, now could exert a crucial force over the selling of the play. This is a marked difference between Pai’s publicity strategy and that for previous *kunqu* productions.

Within PRC, the promotion and consumption of Pai’s *Peony* should be situated in a local social context of popular culture prevalence. Within this discourse, the audiences (particularly young people) have the freedom to make their own choices in their pursuit of individual pleasure. Yet unlike the conventional practice of *kunqu* production, Pai not only attempted to preserve the most authentic elements of *kunqu* performance, but also tried to bridge the gap between the performances on stage and the young audiences who are considered to have been converted by modern popular

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<sup>194</sup> Such BBS and forums can be found at [tieba.douban.com](http://tieba.douban.com), [sina.com.cn](http://sina.com.cn).

culture. In this case, the audiences are no longer an undivided, unknown entity – the new publicity strategies marked a new way of approaching, provoking and communicating with these audiences. These approaches were designed for the intended audiences, with the consciousness about what the play should offer to them: first of all to make their theatre attendance a wonderful experience, and then to introduce *kunqu* art through this play as national heritage.

Despite all this, Pai did not see his construction of a close relationship with the target audiences as a sort of pandering. He believed that he was not giving what the audiences wanted and his work was not merely a presentation of a *kunqu* play; instead, it was a dialogue conducive to helping audiences to learn about *kunqu*, and to “educate the public with beautiful things”. He has always kept the “ultimate” mission of promoting the essence of *kunqu* art or maintaining the artistic integrity of *kunqu* during his publicity and selling campaign.<sup>195</sup>

Finally, apart from the celebrity effect of Pai’s own fame on the publicity of the play, there is also the establishment of the lead singers’ stardom and the consumption of their fame during their tours. The production and consumption of celebrity has become a common feature of modern life and aroused increasing academic interest. A celebrity culture has been well established within China partly due to the country’s adoption of a market-based economy, and partly due to the liberalization of the media, growth of mass media industries and commercial advertising (Edwards & Jeffreys 2010: 1-3). Although the creation of stardom was not the primary goal of Pai’s *Peony*, the establishment of the two lead singers’ stardom in fact became a “by-product” of this show. It reveals what status a *kunqu*

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<sup>195</sup> Pai elaborated the educational function of this production on many occasions. For example, see “Mian dui mian: qingchun nianxiang”, China Central Television News channel, 20 May 2007.

singer can possibly achieve, even at such a young age, if his performances were to be publicized through the modern media. Through their leading performances in this play during the last few years, Shen Fengying and Yu Jiulin have been launched to great fame and attracted their own fan base. The demographic features and supporting behaviours of their fans are akin to those of many other popular stars within the present-day world of Chinese entertainment.

#### **4.3. *Kunqu* in Taiwan**

The development of *kunqu* in Taiwan since 1945 deserves a brief introduction before we discuss the tour performances of Pai's *Peony*. Although this introduction is not directly about the reception of Pai's *Peony* in Taiwan (which I will discuss later in this chapter), it nevertheless is crucial to our understanding of why the Taiwanese audiences would be so enthusiastic about Pai's production.<sup>196</sup> Besides, this introduction will also help explain why Pai has depended upon Taiwan as an important source of manpower and funding as well as a prime market for his *Peony*. In fact, the concept behind the "Taiwan model" of *kunqu* preservation<sup>197</sup> has played a decisive role in the formation of Pai's strategy for his production and publicity.

The ideological gulf between PRC and Taiwan since the middle of the last century has resulted in the divergent trajectories of *kunqu* development, which in turn created distinctive audience bases across the Strait. During these decades, a particular approach to *kunqu* preservation in Taiwan has gradually taken its shape and has been sustained despite adversity of under-funding and cut from the mainland artistic roots.

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<sup>196</sup> Pai holds the firm belief that Taiwan has developed an audience base that is far more enthusiastic and prosperous than that on the mainland, for example, see Pai 2004b: 223-223.

<sup>197</sup> I coined this term myself to indicate the particular way of *kunqu* preservation on Taiwan. Explanation of the features of this model is provided in the following paragraphs.

One of the most prominent features of *kunqu* development during these few decades is that young people have formed the majority of the audience population on Taiwan, and *kunqu* seemed to have replaced Peking opera to become the most popular mainland operatic genre towards the end of the twentieth century (Wang Ailing 2009: 51-52). This highly distinctive trajectory helps to explain why Pai has decided to target the young audience for the selling of his play and why he saw the campus-based *kunqu* promotion as a viable strategy.

Although its earliest appearance in Taiwan can be traced back to mid-Qing times, *kunqu* never acquired status as a dominant operatic genre nor symbolised anything that would represent a collective memory for the whole of Taiwan society. According to Cai Xinxin (2008: 189), this is due to the competition of many different operatic genres, language barriers, and *kunqu*'s distinctive performance features. After 1949, when the Nationalist Party (KMT) retreated to Taiwan, Peking opera was launched as a national opera to accomplish the goals of keeping alive the mainlanders' will to return home, maintaining its identity in the world as the legitimate Chinese government, and instilling "Chinese consciousness" into the hearts and minds of the majority Taiwanese population (Guy 2005: 160). This policy in effect placed other mainland operas, including *kunqu*, and local Taiwanese operas such as *gezaixi*<sup>198</sup> in a marginal position. This paradigmatic shift towards Peking opera as the national dramatic form is similar to the development in the field of drama in mainland China during the Republican years.

The end of WWII brought about a quick revival of traditional opera activities in Taiwan. But when the 1949 Emergency Decree completely cut off any

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<sup>198</sup> *Gezaixi* opera is widely taken to be the indigenous opera of Taiwan. See Belinda Chang 1997: 111.

communications with PRC, the proliferation of professional performances from the mainland suddenly came to a halt. Peking opera was forced to survive as amateur theatre.

Peking opera was promoted as a “national opera” (*guoju*) during the Cultural Renaissance Movement (from the mid-1960s) and was used as an ideological tool to denounce the PRC’s destruction of traditional culture during the Cultural Revolution. With the promotion of this status, it was utilized as a forceful weapon during this sustained cultural warfare against PRC. With the Taiwan government’s tight control over the repertoire and performance arrangements, Peking opera turned into a cultural symbol, but lost its function as aid to the preservation of the cultural memory from the homeland for the mainlanders. However, as the 1980s approached, with the further development of industrialization as well as changes in the political climate, especially the rise of indigenization and democratization, Peking opera’s privileged status was questioned: when the Democratic Development Party (DDP) was about to take power in the 1990s, Peking opera fell out of favour with the government, and its title of “national opera” was discarded. Most Peking opera troupes disbanded and training schools closed. The government shifted its priority onto “Taiwanese” operas, especially *gezaixi*, which was assumed to be the true representation of Taiwan culture, so as to construct a distinct Taiwanese identity. Yet, in order to meet the cultural needs of a multi-ethnic population, the government also included Peking opera, *yuju* opera (i.e. Henan opera), and *Hakkaxi* opera,<sup>199</sup> as part of the government-funded educational agenda in addition to *gezaixi*.

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<sup>199</sup> Originated in Henan Province, *Yuju* opera was introduced to Taiwan by mainlanders when the Nationalist regime retreated to Taiwan in the 1940s. Immediately afterwards, troupes were established in the military forces to entertain the mainland soldiers. Although less prominent than Peking opera, *Yuju* quickly took root and retained its vitality on the island. In the past two decades, Taiwan *Yuju* even became visible on the international

KMT's half-century rule over Taiwan ended with the DDP coming to power in 2000, which further changed the environment for the development of traditional mainland culture on the island. However, factors such as multiculturalism and globalization still provided some leeway for traditional Chinese operas to negotiate a space for their further development.

Against this historical background, *kunqu* remained in a marginal position throughout this period. In contrast to the privileged operatic genres, its development was mainly dependant upon non-governmental support. The following part of this section depicts how Taiwan *kunqu* developed amidst this socio-political change during the second half of the twentieth century and gradually built up its solid audience base.<sup>200</sup>

*Kunqu* during these decades developed on a rather small scale. Not able to obtain an equal share of state resources, it fully depended upon a group of fervent individual supporters, the majority of whom in the first few years were a group of mainlanders. Gradually they were joined by young people who began to take interest through attending *kunqu* classes and club training. The number of people in *kunqu* audiences continued to grow steadily and in effect it resulted in the establishment of a number of *kunqu* societies, many of which were based in colleges and high schools. Most of these societies are still in existence today.<sup>201</sup>

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stage. See “*Yuju* took roots in Taiwan”, on the website of the Drama Research Centre of Henan Normal University: <http://www2.zztz.com.cn/xqyjs/xqzwh/4362.html>. *Hakkaxi* opera is the traditional operatic genre of *Hakka* from eastern Guangdong province and western Fujian province.

<sup>200</sup> For recent Chinese scholarship on *kunqu* development in Taiwan, see Cai Xinxin (2008), Li Bin (2009), and Wang Ailing (2009). I have not found any detailed studies published in the English language.

<sup>201</sup> Between the 1950s and the 1990s, 11 *kunqu* societies were established in middle schools and universities. National University of Taiwan, Taiwan Normal University and other major colleges became the key base camps for *kunqu* promotion. Outsidess schools, *Tongqi quhui* (1949) and *Pengying quji* (1962) are the two leading amateur societies. See Cai Xinxin 2008: 189-93.

The growth of *kunqu* in Taiwan during these decades can first of all be attributed to the unflagging efforts of some individuals. Cai Xinxin points out that several academic professionals including Zheng Yinbai at National Taiwan University, Lu Shengbo at National Chengchi University, and Wang Shiwei at National Taiwan Normal University, among others, have all played a key role in guiding young scholars and students to develop an interest in *kunqu* and have initiated Taiwan academic research and studies in *kunqu* by teaching *kunqu* music in classes and running *kunqu* societies. This approach has been handed down and is followed as a firmly established mode in Taiwan's educational institutions.<sup>202</sup> Another major force that has helped to build the Taiwan *kunqu* community and promoted its growth is a group of well-known *quyou* (literally “music friends,” or fans and amateur *kunqu* actors). The most celebrated include Xu Yanzhi, Zhang Shanxiang, Jiao Chengyun, and Xia Huanxin. Their greatest contributions were the establishment of *kunqu* clubs and societies. These organizations held gatherings regularly, and were run like “salons” where members could attend amateur performances that accommodated both old and new *kunqu* fans. Some *quyou*, such as Jiao Chengyun, edited *kunqu* music notations that contributed to the promotion of the art of *kunqu* in Taiwan.<sup>203</sup>

Generally speaking, schools have provided the key venues for the promotion of *kunqu* in Taiwan. Those school-based societies were operated under the guidance and influence of *kunqu* artists, scholars and *kunqu* fans. The activities of these societies have formed an indispensable part of *kunqu* promotion in Taiwan: they did

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<sup>202</sup> This new generation of scholars include Zeng Yongyi, Hong Weizhu, Lai Benqiao, Li Dianju, etc. See Wu Xinlei 2002: 454-455.

<sup>203</sup> See Cai Xinxin 2008: 190. Also for introductions to these famous *quyou*, see Wu Xinlei 2002: 451-455.

not only accommodate a growing audience base, but also produced a generation of *kunqu* scholars and advocates of the art.

This type of school-based practice has a precedent in the early twentieth century in mainland China. Wu Mei (1884-1939) was celebrated not just as an accomplished dramatist and academic researcher on traditional Chinese drama, but also one who made instrumental contributions to *kunqu* development during its difficult period in the Republican years.<sup>204</sup> Wu was employed to teach classical Chinese drama in Peking University (1917-1922), Southeast University (1922-1933), and then Jinling University (1933-1937). His contribution to the development of *kunqu* (particularly the northern school of *kunqu* art) can be seen in two aspects: his practice demonstrated the mutual benefit of establishing links between the intelligentsia and *kunqu* performers, and he also contributed to the founding of Suzhou *Kunju* Training School (*Suzhou kunju chuanxisuo*). His demonstrations of *kunqu* performance in his class and the establishment of the *kunqu* amateur society “Music appreciation society” (*Shangyin qushe*) was considered to be the first effort of its kind in modern China to explore an alternative means to teach and practice *kunqu* outside professional troupes and training schools.

It might be justifiable to argue that this practice has been “copied” in Taiwan. Jiang Fucong (1898-1980), who studied *kunqu* with Wu Mei in his early years and later worked in Taiwan as Curator of National Taiwan Library and Director of the National Palace Museum but was a life-long fervent *kunqu* fan, once advocated that the most ideal place in which to conduct *kunqu* research and performance learning would be colleges (Cai Xinxin 2008: 191).

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<sup>204</sup> Cheng Huaping discussed the significance of Wu Mei’s introduction of drama education into schools. See Cheng Huaping 2007: 35-38. See also Zhou Bing & Jiang Wenbo 2009: 316.



During the 1990s, the Taiwan government-funded project “*Kunqu* Inheritance Plan” (*Kunqu chuanxi jihua*) significantly accelerated *kunqu* promotion on the island. Inspired by a *kunqu* study tour to the mainland, Zeng Yongyi and Hong Weizhu, both of whom are famous *kunqu* scholars, initiated this ten-year-plan (1991-2000). During the six training classes organized under this umbrella project, *kunqu* fans from the general public and schools were offered opportunities to learn how to perform *kunqu* under the guidance of renowned musicians and professional actors. Besides, the project also produced video recordings of performances of classical works by celebrated singers from mainland *kunqu* troupes. This cross-Strait collaboration in collecting and archiving materials marked a great step forward for *kunqu* preservation (Cai Xinxin 2008: 197-199). With all these efforts, the *kunqu* audience base in Taiwan has grown slowly but steadily, which marked a clear distinction from the worsening situation on the mainland for *kunqu* development during the same period. This is why Pai believed that the best *kunqu* audience base was in Taiwan, and he wanted his play to premiere in Taiwan (Pai 2004b: 223-224). It is also because of this achievement made in *kunqu* preservation on Taiwan that Pai decided to reintroduce this young-people-oriented and campus-based strategy back to the mainland.

#### **4.4. Campus Tours**

From this section onward, I will analyze the performance tours of Pai’s *Peony*. On the surface, most of these performances were invariably received with great interest and enthusiasm. But in order to gain a deeper understanding of the consumption of this play, I will conduct the discussion from an alternative

perspective: the performances will be grouped into three main categories and each category examined separately. The categories proposed for discussion are: campus tours, commercial theatre performances, and involvement in the PRC official project of cultural promotion in the international arena.

The mainstream media reports, reviews and critiques about the *Peony* performance tours were dominated by generous plaudits, dubbing the play as a “miracle”, or a “classic” of modern *kunqu* productions. The sensational reception among the general public was branded a “youth *kunqu* phenomenon” (*qingchun ban kunqu xianxiang*), or the “white *Peony* effect” / “Pai’s *Peony* effect” (*bai mudan xiaoying*)<sup>205</sup>. Yet the key issue here is to find out what lies behind such a favourable attitude towards this *kunqu* production, and what the opponents had to say. It is hoped that an analysis of reviews and criticisms from both sides will reveal what discourses this particular *kunqu* production has been involved in when it toured different parts of the world.

From the outset, Pai had decided that the ultimate aim of his stage production was an attempt at tackling “the most challenging issue confronting *kunqu* preservation,” i.e., the ageing of both *kunqu* actors and audiences. For Pai, the reason why he should select young people as the target audiences for this play was straightforward: “the most urgent issue is to cultivate a generation of young audiences...college students are our first target group, because they have acquired a relatively higher standard of cultural knowledge, and thus are capable of aesthetic appreciation. *Kunqu* is a high art, so since its early history, literary men have dominated its audience population” (Pai 2006: 91-92).

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<sup>205</sup> This is a homonymic pun, since the Chinese word for Pai’s surname happens to be the same word for “white colour”.

Hu Chuanji from Sun Yat-sen University considered Pai's campus tour strategy to be a poignant reflection of the lack of aesthetic education within the PRC which results in most young students' ignorance about traditional culture and arts (in Pai 2006: 289-291). In fact, Pai has expressed his concerns about this problem on many occasions. In his article that recorded the play's first round of the mainland campus tour, Pai wrote:

Since early last century, our country's traditional culture has deteriorated, and been unable to revive. Particularly after the May Fourth Movement, Chinese education system was almost completely Westernized, and traditional Chinese arts, music and operas were excluded from school education, whereas Western arts, music and drama were listed among main courses. The destruction of the "Four Olds"<sup>206</sup> during the Cultural Revolution almost completely destroyed traditional culture. So, for the past century, the cultural identity of our nation was weakened, fragmented and confused. But who doesn't have a yearning for the revival of our glorious cultural traditions? (Pai 2006: 96-97)

This is why Pai decided that campus tours would be "significant and a key task for this play" so as to nurture a generation of young audiences who would start to build an awareness of their own cultural traditions. Due to the importance of these campus performances in Pai's *kunqu* promotional project, I devote this section to a separate discussion on them, and hope that this will reveal how Pai's *Peony* was consumed among the mainland young people.

During 2004 and 2005, Pai's *Peony* travelled to eight universities on the mainland, apart from several commercial performances in different cities.<sup>207</sup> Nearly all these performances sold out quickly and most of the audiences were college students.<sup>208</sup> Then in the second campus tour in the following years the play was taken to some cities in the Mid-west, South and central China. Within little more than five

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<sup>206</sup> This is one of the goals of the Cultural Revolution. The four olds are: old customs, old culture, old habits and old ideas.

<sup>207</sup> For a detailed list of these performances, see the relevant section in Appendix 3.

<sup>208</sup> Pai wrote an article as a record of this first round of campus tour among these universities. See Pai 2006: 91-97.

years, this play has been staged for college students in at least half of China. From Tianjin to Guangzhou, from Shanghai to Chongqing, at almost every stop on its campus tours, the play was welcomed by a very strong wave of enthusiasm among the local community. The available materials reveal that the majority of the mainland audiences (i.e. college students) bear some common features that can be seen through the data obtained by Lou Dapeng from Suzhou University: most of these audiences were not familiar with *kunqu* – about 40% said in this poll that they knew nothing about *kunqu* before; only 60% knew that *Peony* was a very famous *kunqu* play; when asked which part of Pai's *Peony* they enjoyed most, 70% named costumes, stage settings or singing, while only 40% chose the play script (Pai 2006: 262). Why, then, did they come to a show that they knew nothing or very little about? Li Jinyun, a student from Peking University, gave the following reasons: one is curiosity – to find out what a “young-lovers’ version” of a *kunqu* play would be like; and the other is Pai's fame – like most students, Li did not want to miss the chance to see the famous writer in person (Pai 2006: 265). Similar opinions have been found in many other sources of information.

In general, this play has played multiple roles among the young audiences. On the most fundamental level, it served as an introduction to traditional Chinese opera for the students, particularly for those who had not acquired relevant knowledge before. Gui Ying, a professor in drama studies at Zhejiang University, observed that through Pai's *Peony*, the students gained a much deeper understanding of traditional Chinese art, particularly of Chinese opera, because it offered them a real-life chance to appreciate *kunqu* that they had formerly only learned about from textbooks (Pai 2006: 217).

Li Jingyu also admitted that it was this play that changed his previous bias against traditional Chinese opera. For the first time he came to realize the essence of traditional Chinese art. Li was not alone on this point. Nankai University student Zhu Dong believed that Pai's *Peony* had reinstated his faith in traditional Chinese culture: he was amazed that so many students had come to the show not merely out of curiosity, but attracted by the plot of the story and the "Chineseness" of performances (Pai 2006: 266; 256-257). In the *Peony* blog, a reader named [Fanzhao] (03 May 2007) posted a note to Pai, "It is your *Peony* that showed me the beauty of *kunqu* art. We, the young people aged around 20, have learned too little about our country's operatic culture. Thank you for encouraging more young people to start caring about *kunqu*!"<sup>209</sup>

Indeed, closely connected with their sensual experience in the theatre was the stimulation of the audiences' emotional responses. Fei Yi from Beijing Normal University wrote that "in the hearts of our fellow students, the young-lovers' version of *Peony* is a kind of inheritance, a fashion of youth; it is also a heart-felt surprise, an artistic exploration, and an education in aesthetics" (Pai 2006: 267). Similar expressions can be found from many people's online postings. For them, this performance is not merely a *kunqu* play. More importantly it functions as a gateway to their understanding of traditional operatic art, and traditional Chinese culture. The reward for attending the performances exceeded the appreciation of a *kunqu* play. The feelings aroused by this theatrical experience are a combination of satisfaction, amazement and pride in traditional culture. This realized what Pai had hoped to achieve: "the real value of this play lies in the fact that it has offered us a chance to

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<sup>209</sup> See [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_4cee40a3010009af.html#comment3](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4cee40a3010009af.html#comment3), accessed 15 December 2010.

re-evaluate ourselves, and rediscover our national pride and self confidence” (Pai 2006: 272).

On the second level, the young audiences were inspired to seriously reflect on the issue of cultural heritage inheritance. Qian Hongbo from Suzhou University makes a comparison between Pai’s *Peony*, Chen Shizheng’s 1999 New York version and Shanghai *Kunqu* Troupe’s 1999 version. He concluded that Pai “seemed to have found a feasible way for *kunqu* development in the new era” (Pai 2006: 286). The audiences’ comments and discussions of this kind reveal that Pai’s *Peony* has aroused their sense of responsibility to preserve *kunqu* art as cultural heritage.

Some dramatists, such as Zhu Donglin, Zhou Qin, He Xilai and Zeng Yongyi,<sup>210</sup> firmly believed that the achievement of Pai’s *Peony* has great value for the future rejuvenation of *kunqu* art on mainland China. But others raised serious doubts about the young audiences’ enthusiastic embrace of the play. These doubting voices dismissed their fervent activities at the performances as “artsy-fartsy”. To these critics, all these interactions in the campus auditoriums represented just a kind of farcical, herd-like behaviour which would not exert any meaningful influence on *kunqu* development in the future. The short review written by Xiao Kefan serves as a good example of this attitude. He explained how he felt when he attended the second instalment of Pai’s *Peony* at Nankai University in April 2005. The fully packed auditorium – with many students even sitting on the floor of the aisles – looked more like a football stadium rather than an auditorium where an elegant play was about to be staged. During the show, he observed the audiences’ excessive amount of applause and untimely laughter at some lyric lines that he did not find funny at all.

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<sup>210</sup> See their reviews in Pai 2004c and Pai 2006.

He also saw that after the show a student failed to answer an interviewer's question about how much she knew about Pai and this play. With all that he observed, Xiao concluded the excitement and elated sensations towards this performance might just be an illusion about *kunqu* revival. He then further stated his suspicion about Pai's practice, and asserted that the best way forward for *kunqu* conservation would be to put the play into a museum – a stance shared by other conservationists such as Lou Yulie (Xiao 2008: 20-21). Luo Huilin had a similar attitude and warned that one “should not be misled by this *Peony* craze,” since he believed that only by nurturing a generation of *kunqu* fans who are capable of appreciation as well as performance can the *kunqu* art be rejuvenated (Luo 2006).

Sun Shulei, a dramatist from Nanjing Normal University, criticized the abnormal nature of the phenomenal reception of Pai's *Peony* among the mainland audiences. He argued that for many people, this play is all they know about *kunqu* art. He warned that although it was a good thing that more and more people now get involved in the promotion of *kunqu*, one needs to make sure that what he is promoting is “real” *kunqu*, otherwise the misinterpretation will cause eventual loss of audiences. He pointed out that what Pai and other celebrity promoters, such as Yu Dan, have done is only the first step, and the maintenance of this audience population still relies on artists within the *kunqu* circle.<sup>211</sup>

In fact, this dispute points to a very fundamental issue of whether *kunqu* should be viewed as cultural heritage, and whether its existence should involve any evolutionary changes. All students supportive of this play are also supportive of the

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<sup>211</sup> Yu Dan, a professor in Communication studies at Beijing Normal University, became known in China in recent years due to her active promotion of traditional Chinese culture through TV programmes on China Central Television Station. She was the presenter of a TV series on *kunqu* art during the week-long National Day public holiday in October 2007, thus was viewed as another celebrity promoter of *kunqu* art within China. See “Yu Dan jiedu Pai Hsien-yung Mudan ting, gaoya yishu bian le wei?” at [http://www.china.com.cn/culture/txt/2007-10/18/content\\_9076137.htm](http://www.china.com.cn/culture/txt/2007-10/18/content_9076137.htm), accessed 16 December 2010.

idea of accepting *kunqu* art as cultural heritage. They not only enjoy the play, but also view it symbolically and develop a sense of pride and confidence from their experiences of attending *kunqu* performances. The opponents, however, deny that the college audiences are “real” audiences, and even oppose any progressive changes in *kunqu* production. Therefore, to understand why Pai’s *Peony* has received such a phenomenal reception among the young audiences along its campus tour, we need to note that Pai and the young audiences have at least one thing in common: they all acknowledged the symbolic meaning carried in this performance. To them *kunqu* is not merely an operatic genre – it is the best representation of traditional Chinese culture; the stage work *Peony* captures the best of traditional Chinese art.

#### **4.5. Commercial Performances**

Besides introducing *kunqu* art to young people within China, Pai also wanted to introduce it to more people in the world. As he told the Californian audiences at the end of one performance, he hopes that *kunqu* will “take its place as a world opera” (Taiwan Public TV 2007). Pai’s *Peony* embarked on its world tour in 2006 and was performed in many commercial theatres across Chinese mainland, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao, and some Western countries including the U.S., Britain, Greece and Singapore. By discussing the reception of this play in the commercial settings in this section, I intend to explore how people’s attitudes towards *kunqu* and traditional Chinese culture were reflected through their comments and criticisms on this play, and what the future might hold for *kunqu* development in these different contexts.

##### ***Performances in Taiwan***



The premiere of Pai's *Peony* was highly publicized as a major cultural event of the year 2004 in Taiwan. It even became the front-page headline of United Daily News (*Lianhe Bao*), one of the most influential newspapers on the island, just before the premiere took place. Due to the high demand in the box office sales, the play was performed for two consecutive rounds<sup>212</sup> between 29 April and 3 May 2004 at the National Theatre Hall of Taipei. The 9,000 tickets for the six nights were sold solid very quickly, some audiences even flying in from the U.S. and Australia (Pai 2004c: 12).

On numerous occasions, Pai has expressed his belief that today's most qualified *kunqu* audiences are from Taiwan.<sup>213</sup> Nanfang Shuo, a Taiwanese writer, believed that the reason Pai's *Peony* can be so favourably received is because during the course of the past few decades people in Taiwan have developed close concern for "things with innate beauty" – today there are not only wealthy sponsors who are willing to spend money on the arts, but also audiences who have faith in the revival of traditional, refined cultures and arts. This, as he pointed out, provides the soil where *kunqu* art could grow (in Pai 2004c: 167). This strong audience base has also been observed by many other professionals, including *kunqu* master Zhang Jiqing (Zhou and Jiang 2009: 105).

The solidity of the Taiwan audience base can also be seen from the fact that this play appeals to people from rival political parties. Taiwan historian Xu Zhuoyun observed that even under the "gloomy atmosphere" brought about by the intense presidential election held on 20 March 2004, the debut of Pai's *Peony* "swept through the island like a gentle breeze," and it was enjoyed by audiences from both

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<sup>212</sup> The term "round" here refers to the performance of the entire play which could be over several evenings. As was shown, Pai's *Peony* is presented in three parts, usually over three evenings.

<sup>213</sup> See, for example Pai 2004b: 224.

Pan-Blue and Pan-Green<sup>214</sup> coalitions. He asserts that this popularity should be attributed to the play's apolitical theme of romantic passion (in Pai 2004c: 153).

Taiwan audiences demonstrated the most “professional” support. The play's leading actress Shen Fengying noticed that many of them have learned the play by heart so that they sometimes can even hum along to the performances.<sup>215</sup> The Taiwan audiences' reviews and critiques on Pai's *Peony* that I have collected represent a combination of both favourable comments and acute observations of its limitations. Most of them, however, are generally supportive towards Pai's progressive approach in this production. On this point, unlike on the Mainland, these voices sound more unified.

Most Taiwan audiences offered their generosity and tolerance towards the imperfection of the young actors' performances. When talking about Yu Jiulin, the male lead in the play, Zhang Shuxiang said, “as a 20-year-old-or-so young actor, Yu takes up this leading role in such a large-scale production for the first time... it is a historically significant task. This is his good luck, but at the same time it must be his biggest challenge ever. It is hard to imagine how much stress he has to endure” (Pai 2004c: 172) Similarly, Li Huimian expresses his empathy concerning the great stress on the female lead Shen Fengying. Li reminded the readers that one should not forget that this classic play has been played by many established *kunqu* masters, and some of the audiences know this play very well (Pai 2004c: 177). In fact, most Taiwanese audiences considered the young leads' performances to be quite acceptable. “Defects are within expectations; but since they just played these leading roles for the first

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<sup>214</sup> Both are political alliances in Taiwan. The Pan-Blue Coalition consists of the Nationalist Party (or KMT), the People First Party (PFP) and the New Party (CNP). The Pan-Green Coalition consists of the Demographic Progressive Party (DPP), Taiwan Solidarity Union (TSU), and the Taiwan Independence Party (TAIP). Between the two coalitions, the Pan-Green favours Taiwan independence over the Chinese reunification.

<sup>215</sup> See “Zhongguo Kunqu qingchun ban Mudan ting,” at B4, *Taiwan shibao*, 26 September 2006.

time, it has been really difficult for them to achieve what they achieved” (Pai 2004c: 185).

When talking about the reason why *kunqu* performances from the mainland could receive such enthusiastic reception in Taiwan (also in Hong Kong and Macao), Fan Mannong, the co-producer of Pai’s *Peony*, says that, “for all Chinese people, *kunqu* is the root and blood tie of Chinese civilization; it has faithfully conveyed the artistic spirit and aesthetic values of our nation” (Zhou Bing & Jiang Wenbo 2009: 106).

As Wang Ailing observed, two chief reasons for the popularity of Pai’s *Peony* among Taiwan audiences are: to the young Taiwan audiences, Chinese history has remained within a distant “imagination,” and the sense of historical and cultural loss aroused by *kunqu* performances is therefore different from that experienced by the Chinese on the mainland; secondly, the romance theme of this play appeals greatly to the audiences simply because in reality their real passion is suppressed, or their desires are easily satisfied so that they have no means to understand real romantic experiences (Wang Ailing 2008: 53-54, 56).

In contrast with the older generation, the young audiences of this play celebrate an “imagined” China, which is not based on the memory of any real life experiences. In reality, they are both attached to and detached from the geopolitical China: the psychological complexity is basically caused by Taiwan’s physical proximity to the mainland, the very subtle state of cross-Strait relations, together with other social factors. This “between-ness” identity renders people in Taiwan a status very different from that of the mainlanders or any other Chinese diasporas elsewhere in the world.

For these young people, this “imagined” China is not the one embodied by KMT’s eagerness to defeat CCP and obtain its ruling legitimacy; rather it is a symbolic domain that exerts an enduring appeal with its rich culture and celebrated history of the ancestral homeland. There is the root of the symbolic blood-tie, as Fan Mannong puts it. This significant psychological magnetism explains why the Taiwan *kunqu* societies and schools have survived all these decades despite all those political and social changes. It also explains why the Taiwanese empathized with Pai’s efforts to revive *kunqu* art and offered the performance tour unflagging support.

During the past decade or so, in the construction of Taiwanese identity in the cultural domain, the contention actually involved Peking opera and *gezaixi* opera (Belinda Chang 1997: 127). Cultural exchange between PRC and Taiwan did not seem to have been hampered by the growing trend of indigenization and Taiwan’s continuous struggle with its identity crisis. It is under this circumstance that *kunqu* development entered a new phase of what Cai Xinxin called “a period of voluntary articulation” (*ziwo fasheng qi*) (Cai 2008: 204). It is exactly the continuation of this cross-Strait cultural exchange and the success garnered by Pai’s *Peony* that reveals to us the persistent pursuit of Chineseness identity.

### ***Performances in Hong Kong***

Hong Kong’s position in today’s world and its official identity have been altered by the 1997 official hand-over, yet for some local people the psychological settlement concerning their personal identity cannot be completed any time soon. They are trying to find a point of balance between the past and the future, between their link to the PRC and to the rest of the world. Kay Li’s introduction to the overall landscape of Hong Kong theatre underpinned this point. He pointed out that Hong

Kong as a globalized city is presented through “works dealing with local issues, its relationship with PRC, and its connection to the world” (Li 2007: 440-469). Li observes that this pursuit has made Hong Kong theatre a kaleidoscopic combination – one can not only find traditional opera, spoken drama, but also modern dance and Broadway musicals. He further notes that, “[Hong Kong] has not ignored salient local issues or Hong Kong’s new position within the PRC and the world” (Kay Li 2007: 446). Although *kunqu* is not the most popular operatic genre among Hong Kong audiences, it has been promoted there for quite a long time since the early 1990s.<sup>216</sup> The local audiences nurtured by such a theatre would be responsive to a traditional work such as Pai’s *Peony*.

When Pai’s *Peony* was performed at Hong Kong Sha Tin Town Hall, Zheng Peikai, Director of the Chinese Cultural Centre at City University of Hong Kong, observed that thousands of young people swarmed into the theatre and watched the performance with great excitement. He exclaimed that during the last hundred years or so, Chinese only discarded their traditional culture, but this time in the theatre he finally saw young people start to take in the essence of their own national culture. He believed that this play offered an opportunity for young people to learn about traditional culture, and that it would make a major contribution to Chinese cultural innovation (in Pai 2004a: 227-230).

### ***Performances in the U.S. and other Western countries***

*Kunqu* was barely known to the local public in the U.S. before the early years of the twentieth century. Chinese Peking opera master Mei Lanfang brought *kunqu* performance to the American public when he visited the U.S in 1930: he put two

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<sup>216</sup> A *kunqu* research and promotion team was established in 1991 within The Hong Kong Institute for Promotion of Chinese Culture, which has carried out *kunqu* education, promotion and amateur performance training for the general public.

*kunqu* plays in his tour performance repertoire. Yet *kunqu* performances after then were mainly seen within the Chinese community and were accommodated by several *kunqu* amateur societies established in different parts of the U.S. since the 1960s.<sup>217</sup>

Today the active promoters of American *kunqu* still keep a strong memory of and close connection with the *kunqu* circle in PRC. Zhang Huixin and Hua Wenyi can be seen as two examples. Zhang moved to the U.S. from Taiwan in 1983, and is the founding president of the Society of *Kunqu* Arts, Inc. in Maryland, and the co-founder of the *Kunqu* Society in New York. She has very actively participated in the promotion of *kunqu* art by organizing activities in these establishments. Hua Wenyi, originally a celebrated and most promising actress from Shanghai *Kunqu* Troupe, moved to the U.S. in 1989. She founded the Hua Wenyi *Kunqu* Research Society in Los Angeles, and introduced *kunqu* art to American universities including Harvard and Stanford. Hua was also given award of “Heritage Fellow” (1997) by the American National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) (Lei 2009: 80). During the years after her settlement in the U.S., Hua still involved herself in *kunqu* production both in PRC and the U.S. – her latest project being the cooperation with Pai Hsien-yung and Suzhou *Kunqu* Troupe in 2008 for the production of *The Jade Hairpin* (*Yuzan ji*) which will be discussed in Chapter 5.

During the autumn of 2006, Pai’s *Peony* was brought to the State of California. The full play was staged at four different places: UC Berkeley, UC Irvine, UC Los Angeles, and UC Santa Barbara. At a pre-show meeting before the U.S. debut, Pai

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<sup>217</sup> The major societies include: Hawaii *Kunqu* Research Society founded in 1969 (Honolulu), American Chunlei Chinese Music Club *Kunqu* Group in 1979 (Los Angeles); Chinese *Kun* Opera Society in 1981 (Los Angeles); the *Kunqu* Society Inc. in 1988 (New York); the Hua Wenyi *Kunqu* Research Society in 1992 (Los Angeles) and the Society of *Kunqu* Arts Inc. in 1995 (Maryland). All these organizations have major influence only within Chinese communities. Although they tried to expand their influence among the native Americans, it was too difficult due to the lack of funding and culture differences, etc. See Anna Chen, “Yi tiao qiqu de lu, Kunqu yishu zai meiguo”, at [http://www.kunqusociety.org/html\\_cn\\_jian/article\\_chen\\_1\\_cn\\_jian.htm](http://www.kunqusociety.org/html_cn_jian/article_chen_1_cn_jian.htm), see also Wu Xinlei 2002.

asked his cast members to take this opportunity seriously, because it was not merely a *kunqu* performance; what they were doing was “writing history” (Taiwan Public TV 2007). This performance tour caught the attention of the American mainstream media. CBS reported their promotions, and major U.S. papers, including *New York Times*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *Los Angeles Times* all carried reports of the performances. Many smaller newspapers and magazines also joined in the regular follow-up news coverage. The Californian performances were presented to capacity audiences, and the responses were very positive even among native Americans. The following quotes from a few press reviews reveal to some extent the perception of major Western audiences: in this show, “classic and contemporary values were held in mutually reinforcing balance,”<sup>218</sup> and “being in the audience felt like more than spectating – we were a part of Pai’s *kunqu* renaissance.”<sup>219</sup> At Santa Barbara, the final stop on the company’s tour, the play received an enthusiastic “homecoming” welcome (perhaps because Pai himself has been living in Santa Barbara ever since 1969). Ted Mills believed that “2006 belongs to *The Peony Pavilion*” since even for those non-Chinese who knew a little about Chinese opera, “many [of them] had never seen something so lavish, so large, or so loud as this 9-hour epic.”<sup>220</sup>

Most Western reviews sounded a similar note, but mild rebuttal was also heard. *Los Angeles Times*’s Mark Swed put forth a more cynical appraisal by describing this play as “a bare-bones ‘peony’ offering moments of rapturous beauty,” because he believed that the stage setting was simply too bare.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> Steven Winn, “Peony”, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 19 September 2006.

<sup>219</sup> Angie Baecher, “Kunqu and you”, *The Daily Californian*, 18 September 2006.

<sup>220</sup> Ted Mills, “To dream of love: epic Chinese opera one of this year’s major cultural events”, *Santa Barbara News Press*, 10 October, 2006.

<sup>221</sup> Mark Swed “‘Peony’ able to flower amid cuts”, *Los Angeles Times*, 26 September 2006.

While most audiences were mesmerized by the visual “beauty” of this play, one Chinese American who has been living in the U.S. for several decades told Pai that she was moved to tears more than once during the show because the performances aroused her feelings towards the national Chinese culture.<sup>222</sup> Daphne Lei’s research provided a valuable source for the examination of Chinese Americans’ response to this play. She observed that the Californian tour of Pai’s *Peony* captured the sentimental response among the local Chinese audiences. She wrote,

I was moved by these audiences’ unfailingly responsive hearts and youthful dreams. Every performance was completely sold-out, and people attended in lavish attire. During the show I sometimes heard sentimental sighs, which may not have been about the protagonist Du Liniang’s gloom, but rather about their own bygone youth and unfulfilled dreams.

From the perspective of the Chinese diasporas, Lei argues that Pai’s *Peony* has created for these audiences an “alternative China” that has nothing to do with national or political contentions. It is a China that all overseas Chinese can feel proud of. She believes that the tour of this play addressed the nostalgic feelings of overseas Chinese (Lei 2009: 83-84).

These Chinese Americans did not question whether this play was conventional or not. It doesn’t matter if the play is “authentic” enough to be *kunqu*. What really matters is its “Chineseness” – the fact that it comes from China, the ancestral homeland. This symbolic quality of the play is the key attribute that has drawn people to the theatre. In a way, *kunqu*, represented by this show, can be equated with Peking opera, or Cantonese opera, or Sichuan opera, or any other traditional opera that has been brought to the West from China. The reason to say this is that any of these operas will suffice the need of representing China in a sense. Painted faces, silk

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<sup>222</sup> See “Mudan ting qinggang, guanzhong zantan”, at *Shijie ribao*, B12, 19 September 2006.



costumes, falsetto singing, and acrobatics, the combination of all these factors formed a tokenized “Chineseness”. Unlike in Taiwan, here among the diasporic Chinese in the West, this play received less serious criticisms by aficionado audiences and critics from a professional perspective. What matters more for these local audiences in the U.S. is the play’s symbolic meaning.

As opposed to the dominant frenzy over the play within the Chinese community, there were also a few young Chinese Americans who refused to attend the show because of their stereotypical view about Chinese operas. For these young people of Chinese descent but born in the West, attending this show presents them with a double challenge: it is hard to appreciate the slow-paced performance; and the classical verses sung with accent and in stylized singing fashion would always appear incomprehensible. Even with projected English surtitles, the alien effect can still not be fully dismantled. Baecher described how her Hong Kong friend refused her by likening the singing of *kunqu* to screaming cats when she tried to invite him to go with her to see this show at Cal Performances at Berkeley.<sup>223</sup> This phenomenon shows us during the tug-of-war over homeland cultural promotion, the young generation in the host society can play an opposing role and pose real challenges.

Some Chinese parents, on the other hand, still hope that the young generation will discover and maintain their connection to the homeland of China. Pai’s *Peony* was considered by some of them to be a model exemplary of Chinese culture. Li Xuanyi, Director of San Francisco Chinese Performing Arts Association, expressed her view that it is not practical to wish young Chinese Americans born in the U.S. to go back to China to learn Chinese culture; the exquisite art that can be accepted by

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<sup>223</sup> Angie Baecher, “Kunqu and you”, *The Daily Californian*, 18 September 2006.

American mainstream society is thus an ideal channel for the introduction of Chinese culture to these young people, and Pai's *Peony* is a good example.<sup>224</sup>

The London tour of Pai's *Peony* bears much resemblance to the American tour in terms of its reception. This production was recommended by the Chinese Ministry of Culture to be included into the 2008 "China Now" project<sup>225</sup> – the biggest festival of Chinese culture ever to take place in the U.K. Organized by an independently funded, non-profit institution, and supported by the Chinese and British business communities, "China Now" ran for six months with more than 800 events and activities arranged across the whole of U.K. This festival aimed to raise awareness in the local community, and to strengthen understanding and relationships between the two countries.<sup>226</sup>

Pai's *Peony* was performed for two consecutive rounds from 3 to 8 June 2008 at Sadler's Well Theatre in London. The first round saw many luminaries from cultural, academic, and political circles, such as sinologists David Hawkes, Glen Dudbridge, Timothy Brook from Oxford University, Jan Stuart, Keeper for the Department of Asia, and Mary Ginsberg, Curator in Chinese art from British Museum. The former Chinese ambassador Madame Fu Ying also attended the show.

I attended the second round of performances from 6 to 8 June, and had the opportunity to interview Pai thanks to the help of my supervisor Professor Natascha Gentz and another teacher from Edinburgh University Dr. Hsueh-man Shen. The following information is mainly based on my personal observation and personal information obtained from this experience. The seating capacity of Sadler's Wells is

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<sup>224</sup> "Qingchun ban mudan ting juzu dimei, zhongyi xiehui huizhang jiayan kuandai," *Shijie ribao*, 9 October, 2006.

<sup>225</sup> "Zhongguo Kunqu meili wuqing, ouzhou guanzhong wei zhi zhenhan" on Suzhou *Kunqu* Troupe official website <http://www.jsszkjy.com/index.asp?lang=0&module=knowledge&id=8&iscategory=false>, accessed 16 December 2010.

<sup>226</sup> "It's time for 'China Now' in U.K.," *China Daily*, 26 October 2007.

about 1,550. For each evening, the occupancy rate was about 90%. A majority of the audiences were non-Chinese, while the Chinese who attended were from all over the U.K., some even from the north of Scotland. The information gathered from my personal communication with the audiences – a mixture of Chinese and non-Chinese – during these three evenings, together with the comments and reviews published in the press, collectively revealed that the reception of the play in London bears some resemblance to that in the western U.S.: the Chinese audiences were not only interested in the performance itself, but more importantly saw it as a symbol of Chinese culture. Among these excited Chinese members of the audience, there was an elderly lady named Joyce Chu-Cheong, who has been living in London for most of her life. On each of the three evenings I met her before the show, and she told me that she was very proud to see Chinese culture to be promoted through such an elegant art form.

However, by contrast, the Western audiences mainly formed their evaluation and judgement based on the performance per se. The local newspaper reviews show that different people were attracted by different aspects of the play: *Times* critic Donald Hutera asserted that it was the emotional response to the story and the resurrection-themed plot that ensured his return to the next episodes on the following evenings.<sup>227</sup> David Dougill enjoyed the audio-visual aspect of the performance.<sup>228</sup> Anne Ozorio's response seemed to have become even closer to the response hoped for by Pai. She suggested that, "to understand Chinese aesthetics, study *kunqu*."<sup>229</sup> *The Telegraph's* critic Ismene Brown was able to tell the difference between the

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<sup>227</sup> Donald Hutera, "The Peony Pavilion at Sadler's Wells," *The Times*, 5 June, 2008.

<sup>228</sup> David Dougill, "The Peony Pavilion; Sutra," *The Sunday Times*, 8 June, 2008.

<sup>229</sup> Anne Ozorio, "Kunqu: The Peony Pavilion" at Seen and Heard International <http://www.musicweb-international.com/sandh/2008/jan-jun08/kunqu06.htm>, accessed 16 December, 2010.

“aristocratic” *kunqu* and the “energetic, folkloric” Peking opera, but found the English surtitles projected on the side of the stage to be “clunky”<sup>230</sup> which surely pointed to the fact that through translation, the original subtlety of the many uses of allusions in Chinese texts had inevitably been lost.

As the Chinese Ministry of Culture supported the play’s European tour on the condition that the play be promoted as a programme of the country’s key cultural projects, the second venue for the play was Athens. During 12 to 14 June, 2008, Pai’s *Peony* was staged at the city’s Megaron Theatre as a part of the Greece Art Festival of the year. However, for unknown reasons, there were not many reviews about this performance in Greece apart from some brief mention of this tour in some webpages and news articles.<sup>231</sup>

#### **4.6. Involvement in the Official Cultural Promotion**

As Tomlinson observed, “de-territorialization” is the major impact of global connectivity. The complex connectivity transforms cultures of different places, and weakens the ties of culture to place (Tomlinson 1999:29-30). The young generation of Chinese audiences have grown up during the growth of China’s reform and opening-up, and every aspect of their lives has been greatly penetrated by the impact of globalization. Cultural consumption has been dominated by the importation of western concepts and goods. This environment has greatly widened their views, but meanwhile, it has posed a threat to the maintenance of their identity as the national cultural boundary has been blurred.

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<sup>230</sup> Ismene Brown, “*The Peony Pavilion*: the sexy ghost who returns as a virgin,” *The Telegraph*, 5 June, 2008.

<sup>231</sup> For example, see Yan Yafen, “Zhongguo Kunqu meili wuqiong, ouzhou guanzhong wei zhi zhenhan” at <http://www.jsszkjy.com/index.asp?lang=0&module=knowledge&id=8&iscategory=false>, accessed 16 December 2010.

With the aim of contending with these external influences, the Chinese government advocated the deepening of “building the socialist spiritual civilization.” China’s former premier Zhu Rongji once explained that this national project also involves protecting the country’s cultural relics and cultural heritage.<sup>232</sup> In 2004, the Chinese central government issued an important directive for the preservation and development of *kunqu* art (Zhou Bing & Jiang Wenbo 2009: 105). In line with this directive, the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Finance implemented the first five-year plan for the revival of *kunqu*. For each year during this plan, a sum of ten million yuan would be allocated for this purpose.

Unlike any other *kunqu* productions in this new century, the rise to fame of Pai’s *Peony* should also be attributed to the PRC government’s involvement in the production and distribution of this play, and this can be seen through the official support of its publicity campaign and the government’s use of this play as an exemplary model in the country’s cultural propagandistic discourse in recent years. This official endorsement was instrumental for the play’s market exploration during its world tour. However, the Singaporean case (which I will discuss towards the end of this section) poses the question of how to get across information on government endorsement without interfering with the audiences’ enjoyment of the show, particularly at commercial theatres.

During *Peony*’s tour in the U.S., the performing team was received with banquets held by Chinese consulates in San Francisco and Los Angeles respectively. Zhong Jianhua, Consul General in Los Angeles, congratulated Pai and his team on their success at the celebratory dinner on 8 October 2006, saying that their

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<sup>232</sup> Zhu Rongji, “Zhengfu gongzuo baogao” (Report on the work of the government) 2003. *People’s Daily*, 6 March 2003.

performances were a successful case of China's "civil diplomacy" and had great cultural significance.<sup>233</sup> Similarly, the performance tour was supported by the Chinese embassies and consulates when it toured Europe and Singapore.<sup>234</sup>

The high official accolades from the West received by Pai's *Peony* can be viewed as an acknowledgement of the cultural dissemination through this play endorsed by the Chinese government. Among these many plaudits was the letter of thanks collectively signed by the four chancellors of University of California at Santa Barbara, Berkeley, Irvine, and Los Angeles, in which the one-month Californian tour was hailed for enriching the educational experience of the campus communities by presenting traditional Chinese culture in the medium of the performing art of *kunqu*. Besides, proclamations promulgated by the U.S. Congress, the County of Los Angeles, and the City of Santa Barbara acknowledged the play's contribution to Sino-U.S. cultural exchanges and their cultural services to the U.S. local communities. The play's British tour was jointly sponsored by the Chinese Ministry of Culture and Jiangsu provincial government (Liu Yang 2007: 27). The Chinese Embassy in London helped to arrange the pre-show publicity activities in the University of London and Oxford University.

The play was also formally involved in China's cultural diplomacy in recent years. In October 2005, some singers from Pai's *Peony* cast were selected to form a cultural delegation to attend two festivals held in South Korea: one was the Kaya World Cultural Celebration in Gimhae City, and the other was the Busan International Performing Arts Festival. On both occasions, the performers played some scenes from the young-lovers' version of *Peony* for the local audiences and

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<sup>233</sup> Shen Yueming, "Zhen shi yici meiyiao de yishu tiyan" (It's an amazing artistic experience), *Guangming ribao*, 8 January, 2007.

<sup>234</sup> See Liu Yang 2009: 27-28;

tourists. The trip made by this delegation was lauded an important achievement of Chinese cultural promotion (Yin 2005: 28-29). Then, to commemorate the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the reestablishment of Sino-Japanese diplomatic relations, the play's leading singers Shen Fengying and Yu Jiulin joined a cultural performance team organized by the Ministry of Culture to accompany Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao to visit Japan on 12 April 2007. They performed "Interrupted Dreams" from *Peony* at Tokyo National Theatre.<sup>235</sup>

The year 2008 was an important year for China – Beijing's hosting of the Olympic Games created a valuable opportunity for the country to show its best side to the rest of the world through the media, and, more importantly, through the millions of tourists who swarmed to the capital city and other destination cities around the country. Cultural activities were a crucial part of this showcase. The series of cultural and artistic performance seasons started in March of that year, with a number of drama and operatic works selected by the government being staged in the major theatre venues in Beijing. Pai's *Peony* was one of these "essential works" and was performed at Mei Lanfang Grand Theatre between 5 and 10 August.<sup>236</sup>

The following quote from one article published in November 2007 in one of China's principal CCP party newspapers, *Guangming Ribao*, clearly reveals the Chinese government's supportive stance towards Pai's *Peony*, and explains why this play was involved in the official discourse:

...the collaborative work of the young-lovers' version of *The Peony Pavilion* between renowned writer Pai Hsien-yung and Suzhou *Kunqu* Troupe...greatly promoted *kunqu* art into a higher position in the world, and once again revealed to the world the rich culture of China and the extraordinary artistic creativity of the ancient Chinese. This play has become a successful model for *kunqu* to explore the international

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<sup>235</sup> Mei Lei, "Sukun: huotai chuancheng, zai su jingdian", *Suzhou ribao* 17 September 2010. [http://www.szgujian.com/People\\_Article.aspx?Id=36](http://www.szgujian.com/People_Article.aspx?Id=36), accessed 16 December 2010.

<sup>236</sup> Zhan Qiang, "Jingpin jumu xianyi aoyun", *Guangming Ribao*, 8 August 2008.

market...A group of cultural professionals and men of insight represented by Pai stepped forward and became “*kunqu* volunteers.” They hoped that through the ‘irresistible beauty’ of this youthful production, the Chinese people’s somewhat numbed aesthetic tastes would be edified, their souls attracted by material lust would be touched and purified; the young people could be introduced to the permanent charm of our own nation’s traditional culture, and their passion for these traditions could be aroused... The young-lovers’ version of *Peony* has provided us with a perfect example of how to combine nationalism and contemporaneity in a single stage work.<sup>237</sup>

In this discourse, the play’s authenticity was not challenged, but instead its dual function as a didactic tool as well as an aesthetic medium was highlighted.

Chinese premier Wen Jiabao attended Pai’s *Peony* when it was staged in the National Theatre of Performing Arts on 3 July 2009 – a performance to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of PRC. Wen highly praised the abridgement, the performance, the actors and the stage setting of the play. He encouraged the troupe, saying that “we should work together to promote and inherit the traditional culture of our nation.”<sup>238</sup> This praise from the country’s top leader once again clearly indicated the central government’s support for this play.

The Chinese government’s endorsement for Pai’s *Peony* was also underpinned by the conferring of awards upon the leading singers and Pai himself. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Chinese Drama Plum Award, the “Oscar” in Chinese drama circle,<sup>239</sup> was held in Beijing in December 2007. Both Yu Jiulin and Shen Fengying were recipients of this award. Yu believed that although they became the holders of the award, it should be seen as a symbolic recognition of the entire play and the work of all the 80-some team members. He felt greater responsibility in accepting this award.<sup>240</sup> In June 2009, the Fourth Chinese *Kunqu* Festival was held in Suzhou City. A group of individuals

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<sup>237</sup> Wan Su, “Qingchun ban Mudan ting re yan haiwai de sisuo”, *Guangming Ribao*, 16 November 2007.

<sup>238</sup> “Qingchun ban Mudan ting yingde zongli si ge hao”, *Chongqing Wanbao*, 28 August, 2009.

<sup>239</sup> This award was launched in 1983 aiming at acknowledging the achievements of outstanding young actors in Chinese drama world. Organized by Chinese Dramatist Association, this award was held annually before 2007, then changed to once every two years.

<sup>240</sup> Yang Fan, “Yao rang Kunqu geng nianqing yidian”, at <http://www.szcl.gov.cn/youxin/web/ReadNews.asp?NewsID=877>, accessed 20 December 2010.



and organizations were given awards by the Chinese Ministry of Culture for their contributions to *kunqu* preservation. Among them, Pai was the sole winner of the “Outstanding Contribution Award.”<sup>241</sup>

However, the play’s tour to Singapore strikes a note of disharmony, and complaints focusing on the issue of ticket sales and an unexpected “official speeches prelude” significantly undermined the overall review of its performance. From 8 to 10 May 2009, Pai’s *Peony* was staged in the Singaporean Esplanade – Theatre on the Bay. But due to the improper ticket sales arrangements, this performance brought about some unexpectedly negative outcomes.

This tour was organized by the management committee of the China-Singapore Industrial Park.<sup>242</sup> The first evening’s performance was scheduled to open on the fifteenth anniversary of the launch of this industrial park. At an interview on 7 May on Singapore TV Channel 8 “Good Morning Singapore,” Pai told the journalist that Singapore was a country to which he had always wanted to introduce his *Peony* since a large section of the country’s population are of Chinese descent. When asked if he would be concerned about the popularity of this play since Chinese culture was not necessarily the mainstream culture of the country, Pai expressed his confidence, saying, since the Western audiences in the U.S. and Europe enjoyed the show, why Singaporeans would not also do so. This brief TV interview offered no further explanation or analysis, but this conversation clearly indicated that it was perceived a possibility that Singaporeans could potentially be critical towards this play. In fact, Pai was not totally carefree about their Singaporean tour. He knew that it could be a

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<sup>241</sup> Pai was awarded not only for his production of *The Peony Pavilion* and another *Kunqu* play *The Jade Hairpin*, but also for his contribution in the forms of offering *Kunqu* lectures and editing books to introduce the art. See “Pai Hsien-yung, Wu Xinlei deng tuiguang Kunqu huo biao zhang”, *Yangzi wanbao*, 23 June, 2009.

<sup>242</sup> As a cooperative project, this industrial park was located in Suzhou, and launched in May 1994.

big challenge to bring this play to such a metropolitan city, as he told the journalist of the biggest Chinese newspaper in Singapore: *Lianhe zaobao*.<sup>243</sup>

To the surprise of many people, the reviews of the play's Singaporean tour were distinctively negative. The criticisms mainly concern two issues. The organizing committee had reserved a large number of VIP tickets for the local guests, while the remaining tickets for the public were sold out within a month in March. But the tour performance coincided with that year's Day of Vesak and Mother's Day, causing many guests to decline the invitation. Therefore, until less than a week prior to the show, there were still about 1,000 tickets remaining unclaimed. To reduce this unexpected impact to a minimum, tickets were sold at discounted prices, and were even distributed free at pre-show lectures and workshops. By the start of the performance, most of the untaken seats in the large theatre with seating capacity of about 2,000 were, in fact, occupied but many members of the audience who had bought tickets at a high price in March felt indignant about their unfair treatment.<sup>244</sup> Yet this is not the end of the story: the "free tickets" disturbance caused by the organization team's miscalculation was coupled with another occurrence during the opening evening, and deepened the dissatisfaction. Prior to the performance on 8 May, three Chinese officials took turns to deliver congratulatory speeches for the Industrial Park's anniversary. This was frowned on by many in the audience even though the talks were brief enough.<sup>245</sup> This bureaucratic formality was obviously not appreciated on this occasion, which formed another miscalculation on the part of the organizer of this performance tour: where Chinese see official involvement as

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<sup>243</sup> Pan Xinghua, "Qingchun ban Mudan ting wu yue lai xin yanchu", *Lianhe zaobao*, 30 March 2009.

<sup>244</sup> Zhou Zhaocheng, "Naihe Mudan ting", *Lianhe zaobao*, 10 May 2009. Also see Li Yeming, "Jing xin dong po Mudan ting" on the official website of Singapore Literature Society at [http://sgcls.zhongwenlink.com/news\\_read.asp?NewsID=553](http://sgcls.zhongwenlink.com/news_read.asp?NewsID=553), accessed 20 December 2010.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

appropriate for such a celebratory event, the Singaporeans see it as a violation of artistic appreciation.

Li Yeming's questions in his web post poignantly revealed the key issue: "What is the basic stance of the (Chinese) government's cultural promotion? Is 'government sets up the stage and cultural activities play the star role' the proper practice, or is the opposite true? This is probably the key point to the distinction between progressive concepts and old tradition."<sup>246</sup>

#### 4.7. Conclusion

The value of Pai's *Peony*, as shown in this chapter, also lies in its opening up of several discourses that involve both domestic and international arenas into which today's *kunqu* art may enter. This is of great importance for us to understand the possibilities for future *kunqu* development, particularly when audience base expansion is taken into serious consideration. On the surface, this play was widely viewed as a successful example of *kunqu* preservation because of its unrivalled market achievement, but in fact it provides us with a much more complex picture about issues such as fund-raising, marketing, and communications. This play is in a way publicized and sold as a cultural commodity, but it is significantly different from common commodities because it has not been used for making a profit. The difference is even more conspicuous when official involvement and the distinctive responses of all audiences are examined.

As discussed, divergent social-cultural situations and various psychological needs of people within these different contexts have generated different responses

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<sup>246</sup> Li Yeming at [http://sgcls.zhongwenlink.com/news\\_read.asp?NewsID=553](http://sgcls.zhongwenlink.com/news_read.asp?NewsID=553), accessed 20 December 2010.

towards Pai's *Peony* since its debut. However, it is hard to draw a clear distinction among these reactions as we can find examples of overlap: (re)discovery of the aesthetic values of *kunqu* art is not just a reward for the non-Chinese audiences but also for native Chinese young people on the mainland; the play is viewed as a cultural symbol of the homeland of China not just for Taiwan audiences, but also for the diasporic Chinese communities in the West as well; a sense of pride in seeing China rise not just economically but also culturally is a good wish for Chinese both within and outside of China.

In the age of globalization, some Chinese emigrants, sojourners and their children living in different parts of the world have gone through indigenization and assimilation and have possessed a variety of ethnic cultures of the host societies, but they still need to claim Chinese identity. Their response to Pai's *Peony* reveals this need. Besides, both the Chinese government's support for and strategic use of this play as well as the mainland young people's immense interest in this play signifies the country's search for soft power development and the construction of cultural identity.

The key point to the understanding of the achievement of Pai's *Peony* is to see that on the one hand, Pai felt a strong urge to take immediate action to preserve *kunqu* art and to promote traditional Chinese culture; on the other hand, many non-Chinese have an interest in Chinese performing art, while all Chinese from across the geographic boundaries feel the need to pursue a cultural identity that is linked to China. It is this play that appears to have bridged the two ends. The multiple roles that this production plays indicate that we now enter an era when the trend of *kunqu* development is not just determined by the intrinsic artistic quality of the genre, but

also largely affected by its newly acquired title of cultural heritage which renders the genre a legitimate symbol of traditional Chinese culture.

The phenomenon of Pai's *Peony* has sparked a new wave of discussions which not only focus on the issue of preserving *kunqu* as an operatic genre, but also on the inevitable topic of preserving it as cultural heritage. Indeed, Pai's practice can be viewed as a seminal progress in today's *kunqu* production – even though his own involvement in the *kunqu* circles and the authenticity of his play is still held in dispute. The impact of this play is profound and can be seen in many new *kunqu* productions that followed. This will be the main topic of the next chapter.

## CHAPTER FIVE    A Few *Kunqu* Productions Following Pai's

### *Peony*

As discussed in the last chapter, Pai Hsien-yung's young-lovers' version of *The Peony Pavilion* was reputed to be one of the most eye-catching "cultural phenomena" in the first decade of this century. It captures the attention of the public with its unique approach to production and its extensive travel around the world, and is arguably one of the most important contributing factors in the new surge of public interest in *kunqu*. However, it is also important to know whether Pai's production had an impact on other *kunqu* productions that were being performed around the same time. These other productions include a more rigorous "return to the tradition" and more progressive experiments in exploring the market value of *kunqu* art as a cultural commodity.

In this chapter I will focus on these various approaches of stage production so as to explore these issues: what is the legacy of Pai's *Peony* apart from its contribution to the expansion of youth audiences? How do his production and publicity strategies affect the overall *kunqu* circle? And what choices have the producers of these various new productions made in the dichotomy between tradition and innovation? To answer these questions, I will analyse a few examples, each of which represents an aspect of this new wave of experimentation following Pai's *Peony*. The influence of Pai's *Peony* – its production approaches and publicity strategies – is immediately apparent in these new productions in one way or another.

The dialectical relationship between tradition and innovation has been redefined through all these new experiments.

My purpose in studying these new cases is two-fold: on the one hand, they will offer a kaleidoscopic view of today's Chinese *kunqu* circle, and also the study will reveal that Pai's *Peony* not only has greatly altered the demographic features of the *kunqu* audience base, but also exerted great impact in the arena of stage production – a field that now involves not only *kunqu* professionals but also artists and business people from both within and outside China with various backgrounds; on the other hand I wish to further explore how the concepts of “tradition” and “convention” in *kunqu* art are interpreted and balanced to meet the various primary needs of the expanding audience base and in seeking its commercial value. All these cases under discussion here will help us gain a deeper understanding of how China's traditional art forms are responding to the country's cultural and economic reform, and what role(s) Pai's new *kunqu* production has played in such a socio-political and cultural context.

The first case to be discussed here is Pai Hsien-yung's second *kunqu* production *The Jade Hairpin* (*Yuzan ji*). Through the examination of this work we will see how his principle of “traditional performing plus modern staging” developed into a clearly articulated rule of “new *kunqu* aesthetics” (*kunqu xin meixue*). The second case deals with Gu Duhuang's *The Palace of Eternal Youth* (*Changsheng dian*) – a production which came out two months earlier than Pai's *Peony*. Despite a similar cross-Strait collaborative approach and similar publicity strategy, Gu's *Palace* has not achieved the sustained popularity as that attained by Pai's *Peony*. The compromise which Gu, as a well-known conservationist, has made in this work

shows us the difficult position which such professionals, who resolve to safeguard the conventions of *kunqu* performance but meanwhile feel the urge for the audience base construction, find themselves in. Following this case, Tian Qinxin's *The Peach Blossom Fan* (*Taohua shan*) will be discussed: this is an adaptation of a *kunqu* classic that was modelled on the *Peony* formula of production and distribution and attained its own popularity through riding the wave of *Peony*'s success. This particular work is valuable not only because of its similarities with *Peony*, but also because of its success as a production by the first privatized *kunqu* troupe within China: through this work, the company found a way to combine its dual responsibility of preserving and developing *kunqu* art with supporting itself by box office success. The next section deals with examples of exploring *kunqu*'s value for high-end entertainment consumption – bound up with luxury club houses, restaurants and the “tangible” cultural heritage of Suzhou gardens. All these high-end productions have drawn inspirations from Pai's *Peony* in certain aspects, and they collectively demonstrate the commercial value of *kunqu* art in today's China. Some of these attempts have proven to be hugely successful in terms of commercial gains. The last case is Pai Hsien-yung's campus-based *kunqu* promotion scheme based in Peking University and Suzhou University, and the so-called “campus-version” of *The Peony Pavilion* that was produced and performed by university students under the training of the cast team from Pai's young-lovers' version *Peony*. Through this case we will see that Pai's “new *kunqu* aesthetics” is now firmly established as standard values among some amateur performers and young audiences. Finally, I will conclude the chapter with a short reflection on the various groupings in which *kunqu*



as cultural heritage has been constructed and utilized for different purposes in different social discourses.

Today, *kunqu* is no longer used as a tool for ideological mass education. The autonomy enjoyed by this operatic genre since its emancipation from extreme political control, together with the deepening of commercialization in the nation's cultural sector, has provided a hotbed for the many experimental practices that have emerged alongside the government-awarded, more didactically oriented productions. Moreover, in terms of popularity, these less conventional and even avant-garde works obviously outshone the conventional ones, and this has added to the complexity of the already inflamed debate about tradition versus innovation.

### **5.1. *The Jade Hairpin*: Pai Hsien-yung's New *Kunqu* Aesthetics**

Despite the achievements of his *Peony*, Pai Hsien-yung firmly believed that it is the PRC government that should play a leading role in *kunqu* preservation, and that one or two individual works can not really relieve the “*kunqu* crisis” that still looms large.<sup>247</sup> However, he did not cease his efforts to make a personal contribution to this cause. Pai's *The Jade Hairpin*, a 2.5-hour, six-scene adaptation of another famous play from the *kunqu* repertoire, was first introduced to its audiences in 2008.<sup>248</sup> It is of great importance for us to analyse this production in order to understand Pai's principle applied to the adaptation of *kunqu* works, principle that he now defines as the “new aesthetics” – his own particular choice to balance between *kunqu*

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<sup>247</sup> This information was obtained from my personal communication with Pai, see Appendix 4. See also Zhong Gang, “Yi ge ren de Yuzan Ji”, *Nandu zhoukan*, 18 November 2008.

<sup>248</sup> Members of the production team of Pai's *Hairpin* include: Producer: Pai Hsien-yung; director: Weng Guosheng; performing consultants: Yue Meiti, Hua Wenyi; costume designers: Wang Tong, Zheng Yongni; music designer: Zhou Xuehua; Choreographer: Song Huiling; stage designer: Wang Mengchao; lighting designer: Huang Zuyan.

convention and innovation. From *Peony* to *Hairpin*, we see the major steps of the trajectory development of this aesthetic principle: if *Peony* is a test, then *Hairpin* is more like the mature fruit of this test.

Written by the Ming dynasty playwright Gao Lian (1527-1609), *Hairpin* originally tells a love story between Pan Bizheng, a young scholar, and Chen Miaochang, a Taoist nun. Having failed in an imperial examination, Pan goes to stay with his aunt, the “mother superior” of a Taoist monastery, and meets Chen, a talented young woman from a war-stricken but well-off family who is seeking shelter in the monastery and becoming a nun. With a desire for worldly passion, Chen finds it impossible to resist Pan’s courtship and falls in love with him. When Pan’s aunt discovers the love affair she fears that the issue will bring scandal to the monastery and sends Pan off to prepare for another round of examination. Pan finally passes the exam and returns to marry Chen as he has pledged. Unlike *Peony*, *Hairpin* was made into a work to be staged in a single evening performance by staging only 6 scenes out of the original 33. The narrative concentrates on the protagonists’ encounter, the establishment of their relationship and their departure.

Pai Hsien-yung selected this play to be his second production because of its similarities with *Peony* in two respects: it is another signature play that stars a young male against a young female,<sup>249</sup> and its theme is also the audacious pursuit of love between the young protagonists (Pai 2010: 8). In the story, the protagonists do not directly express their affection for each other verbally, but through the music of a

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<sup>249</sup> There is a technical theatre term for this type of play: *shengdan xi* (a play of young male and female). It is one of the most important theatrical types in *kunqu*.

Chinese plucked zither (*guqin*) and poems. This, as Pai explained, is the most typical manifestation of the ancient Chinese literati's temperament.<sup>250</sup>

Here it is evident that in order to consolidate the newly-constructed audience base, Pai chose the romantic theme that had already been proven to appeal to general audiences. However, in terms of the length of this work, it is significantly shorter than *Peony* – not even as long as one instalment of it. The question arises of why the length is reduced so much more significantly? The general director of *Hairpin* Weng Guosheng once revealed that the production team hoped to make this play into one that could make a profit.<sup>251</sup> This vision obviously runs contradictory to Pai's stance that the *kunqu* aesthetics should not be compromised for commercial reasons, and that *kunqu* should not be used in order to make money. Yet Pai has not openly explained why he compromised on this point in *Hairpin*, nor has there been any clarification about his dramatic switch to such a small-scale production. We may find some subtle suggestions from the fact that Pai has mentioned many times the difficulties in fund-raising, in the coordination of the productions, and his occasional feeling of powerlessness because no one has yet come forward to take over his role in leading this *kunqu* promotion programme.<sup>252</sup> Whether or not *Hairpin* will turn out to be commercially viable, we see from it that Pai was prepared to make compromise on the length of the work, but maintained his aesthetic principle established in *Peony*. In fact, this principle was even further developed.

Although it is a much shorter work, *Hairpin* is a production with an idea just as grand as that of *Peony*: it should be taken as the second work in the sequential

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<sup>250</sup> See Lun Bing, "Pai Hsien-yung jiemi xin ban Yuzan ji", *Beijing Youth Daily*, 9 December 2009.

<sup>251</sup> See Zhong Gang, "Yi ge ren de Yunzan ji", *Nandu zhouban*, 18 November 2008.

<sup>252</sup> For example, see Shi Yan, "Zheme hao de yi duo mudan, shui jie guoqu?" *Nanfang zhouban*, 25 March 2010.

development of Pai's *kunqu* aesthetic construction. In fact, it is in *Hairpin* that this construction gained its name of the "new *kunqu* aesthetics" (Pai 2010: 6).

The wording of the title of this stage work once again reveals much discretion. It is called a "new version" (*xinban*) of *Hairpin*, rather than a "youth-version." Pai explains that this is because the lead singers (Shen Fengying and Yu Jiulin, the same pair as in *Peony*) are now approaching 30 years of age, so "youth-version" is no longer the best choice of expression.<sup>253</sup> The alteration in the title nevertheless does not affect the adoption of the same production mode. Through this work Pai intended to further develop his aesthetic principle in *kunqu* production: abstraction, lyricism and refinement. To realize this aim, he once again utilized traditional cultural icons in stage setting as he did in *Peony*, such as Chinese calligraphic works, traditional paintings of landscapes and Buddhist figures and lotus flowers<sup>254</sup> (see Figure 5) and turned them into highly expressive variables. Pai elaborated that these art works in essence bear resemblance to *kunqu* performance, i.e. the concept of smooth lines are utilized not only in Chinese calligraphy and painting, but also in the graceful movements of *kunqu* performances. By incorporating all these elements, these lines combine to form a simple but harmonious system of artistic symbols. Buddhist portraits are also used, and this practice is justified by the fact that religion is an element of the story.<sup>255</sup> Pai believes that *Hairpin* has the potential to best reveal the simplicity and elegance of *kunqu* art: it will be a step forward in this direction.<sup>256</sup> Obviously, to Pai's understanding, the key values of *kunqu* aesthetics is not just

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<sup>253</sup> See "Pai Hsien-yung ban Yuzan ji guanhou si dian qishi" at <http://www.kunqumi.com/dispbbs.asp?/1005-3965.html>, accessed 2 February 2011.

<sup>254</sup> These Buddhist figure portraits are used to highlight the concept of graceful "lines" and the religious background of this story. The image of a lotus flower is also used because it is also a Buddhism symbol.

<sup>255</sup> The distinctions between Buddhism and Taoism were not highlighted during Ming and Qing times, and they often borrowed and practiced each other's concepts. This is reflected in *Hairpin*, see Pai 2010: 8.

<sup>256</sup> See Pai Hsien-yung, "Kunqu de meixue jiazhi", *Renmin zhengxie bao*, 4 January 2010.

embodied in the performances (i.e. acting and singing), but also in the stage setting. To fully appreciate this aesthetic construction requires the audiences to pay equal attention to both respects.

The calligraphy and paintings aside, the biggest selling point of *Hairpin* is probably the Chinese zither used in the accompanying orchestra (see also Figure 5). This instrument is not a common piece but a precious antique with 1252 years of history, one of the oldest extant Chinese zithers in the world today. Handed down from the Tang dynasty, this instrument is owned by a Hong Kong instrument collector. On the official website of Suzhou *Kunqu* Troupe, the announcement of the *Hairpin*'s premiere is introduced by these lines:

*Kunqu*, zither: the simultaneous debut of two pieces of great intangible culture heritage of humanity;

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This performance will be joined by the great zither master Li Xiangting and the zither named "*Jiuxiao huanpei*",<sup>257</sup> the Tang Dynasty imperial court treasure.<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> This is the name of the zither. *Jiuxiao*, means the greatest height of the heaven; *huanpei*, originally means the jade ornaments worn by ancient Chinese women; it is also used to describe the clanging of fine jade, or enchanting music tones.

<sup>258</sup> Li Xiangting, one of the most well-known accomplished musician and zither player in today's China. Chinese zither (*guqin*) was proclaimed by UNESCO in November 2003 as intangible cultural heritage of humanity. For the announcement of the play's premiere, see "Xin ban Yuzan ji quanqiu shouyan gonggao", 18 October 2008 at [http://www.jsszkjy.com/lwmarticle/article\\_detail.asp?lang=0&module=notice&id=127](http://www.jsszkjy.com/lwmarticle/article_detail.asp?lang=0&module=notice&id=127), accessed 6 February 2011.



**Figure 5** The calligraphy, traditional paintings and zither in Pai Hsien-yung's *The Jade Hairpin*.  
**Top:** Buddhist painting and calligraphic works. Photo by Hsu Pei-hung;  
**Bottom:** Zither master Li Xiangting holding the antique zither at the curtain call with Pai Hsien-yung, Cai Shaohua and the cast. Source: [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_558cd4320100fyd2.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_558cd4320100fyd2.html), accessed 10 May 2011.

Although the zither is not uncommon in today's *kunqu* orchestration, it has never been highlighted as such a prominent selling point before. It is not hard to understand

Pai's idea of involving the antique zither and the great master player if we take his vision of revitalizing traditional Chinese culture into consideration.

*Hairpin* marked another round of Pai's collaboration with the Suzhou *Kunqu* Troupe and artists from Taiwan and Hong Kong. A majority of the production team are from his *Peony* crew. Zhang Shuxiang from National Taiwan University was responsible for the script re-editing. Taiwan film director Wang Tong was in charge of costume design. Weng Guosheng, the current director of the Zhejiang Peking Opera Troupe and who was formerly a *kunqu* martial actor, was appointed the general director of this production. Weng is known in the opera circles for his progressive approach to the reform of Peking opera in recent years. His participation in this play is taken as a direct cause of the innovation of this production. He reiterates the general principle of *kunqu* production as "to combine the task of inheritance with development, and preservation with innovation, so that a new version of this play can be produced" (Weng Guosheng 2010: 28). The lead singers of *Hairpin*, Yu Jiulin and Shen Fengying, were trained by another two master *kunqu* singers Hua Wenyi, the acclaimed former Shanghai *kunqu* actress, and Yue Meiti, a world-renowned *kunqu* male impersonator. The collaboration of these masters in *Hairpin* in the early years of their careers has been widely lauded as the best version of this famous play.<sup>259</sup> Pai complimented their performances as "second to none", and when explaining his decision to put the lead singers under their training and guidance, Pai said,

... The work starring Yue and Hua is the publicly recognized classic interpretation of this play. Both of them are now over 60 years of age, so it is high time they passed

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<sup>259</sup> See Niu Chunmei, "Pai Hsien-yung zai tui qingchun ban Yuzan ji", *Beijing ribao*, 13 November 2009.

their performance down to the younger generation. To do this is not just to leave us with no regrets, but also our unshakable responsibility.<sup>260</sup>

Pai's new-version *Hairpin* debuted in Suzhou on 8 November 2008, and in the following years, it travelled to Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Hong Kong and Taiwan. On the surface, the reception of this work was generally positive. *Kunqu* expert Zhou Qin from Suzhou University observed that the instant popularity of this play is not surprising given the fact that like *Peony* it is again generated by Pai's fame. Wang Yueyang from Shanghai Tongji University can be taken as a representative of the favourable supporters of this new work. He considered that in *Hairpin* Pai has achieved a good balance between tradition and innovation: the innovations were made in stage settings but *kunqu* performing traditions were preserved (Wang Yueyang 2010: 30-31).

However, in contrast to the overwhelmingly positive nature of the critical reception of *Peony*, the reviews and comments on *Hairpin* reveal a more mixed response, both positive and negative. This change is identified not only from the scholarly critiques, but also among the general public, especially young audiences.

In June 2010, a conference on the theme of the performance of *Hairpin* was held in Nanjing and was attended by dramatists, critics and *kunqu* artists from around the country. Instead of offering a unanimous plaudit (as had been the case with *Peony* among mainstream dramatists just a few years back), every participant pointed out both the perfection and the shortcomings of the work. Their praise focused on the youthful and elegant quality of the performances, whereas their criticisms were mainly concerned with the weakness in the structuring of the scenes, and the imperfections in the acting and singing. The comments of Cui Wei from the China

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<sup>260</sup> See Zhong Gang, "Yi ge ren de Yunzan ji", *Nandu zhoukan*, 18 November 2008.



Theatre Association are typical of their views. He said, on the level of physical form, *Hairpin* is presented with great elegance, yet there is room for improvement in the depiction of different characters' personalities and emotions; the dramatic performance has yet to be developed into a poetic level... because the expressiveness and delicate technology is the ultimate realm of performance (Cai Zhengren et al. 2010). Most discussants in this conference compared Pai's adaptation against the play's original text and earlier productions of it.

On the other hand, the general public's opinions towards this play, which are mainly found on the internet, varied widely.<sup>261</sup> To summarize, there are two distinct features of these comments. Firstly, many audiences tend to use Pai's first production *Peony* as a standard to form their judgment. Secondly, their dissatisfaction is now much more explicitly expressed: some criticisms centre on the lack of improvement in the lead actors' performances over the years, and other on the stage setting and orchestration. The following quote from a reader of Pai's blog offers a good example of the most harsh criticism on the stage setting:

...the costume design was the most regrettable failure of this production: there was no contrast of colours, and the head-dress of the Taoist nun was so ugly... I firmly believe that the stage setting should never steal the show from the performance. The huge calligraphy scrolls were so eye-catching, yet we were not here to appreciate the brush writing. So were the Buddhist portraits... And the most hateful part was the accompaniment of the *gugin*: its music doesn't at all blend with the whole show; and apart from being an advertising gimmick, there wasn't any reason to use it.<sup>262</sup>

*Kunqu* scholar Zhou Qin holds a similar view on this point. He believed that the key point of a *kunqu* performance is singing. All the cultural elements adopted are simply

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<sup>261</sup> These criticisms were mainly collected from the blogs of *kunqu* artists and a few active *kunqu* fans as well as bulletin boards and chat rooms. For example, see [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_558cd4320100fyd2.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_558cd4320100fyd2.html), and [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_4072b37a0100gnyz.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4072b37a0100gnyz.html), both accessed 10 February 2011.

<sup>262</sup> This harsh criticism is quoted from a blog reader's comment on He Hua's article "Zai Taipei kan Yuzan ji" on 2 December 2009 that is posted in Pai's blog. See [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_4cee40a30100dk8u.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4cee40a30100dk8u.html), accessed 10 February 2011.

for publicity purposes.<sup>263</sup> From these assertions, we see that not any “traditional” cultural icon adopted here is readily accepted as representing Chinese traditional culture and as perfectly relevant to this *kunqu* production.

Besides, many young audiences start to evaluate the performances of the lead singers, and their views can be put into two broad categories:<sup>264</sup> on the one hand, some still hold a tolerant and appreciative stance, saying that the two singers are making contributions to the inheritance of *kunqu* arts, and despite the imperfections, they are still making progress and deserve encouragement rather than criticism. On the other hand, however, some expressed their disillusionment about the fact that both singers had not made reasonable progress especially in their performing skills despite training with such great master teachers.<sup>265</sup>

From *Peony* to *Hairpin*, what does this change of opinion shown in the comments made by the general public indicate? Does this mean that the “honeymoon phase” between the young audiences (especially those new *kunqu* fans) and the Pai-style works is drawing to an end, and audiences have started to evaluate these works with less emotion but more reason? Or indeed is *Hairpin* not as good as *Peony*? Zhou Qin warned that there would be no point in comparing *Hairpin* against *Peony* because these plays are completely different in the first place in terms of their length, theme, and performing style. It is more sensible to compare them to their respective predecessor versions so as to understand if Pai’s productions have inherited *kunqu* conventions. Before ending this section, I want to highlight two details that are less noticeable but just as important for us to see clearly how Pai’s principle has evolved

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<sup>263</sup> See “Cong Mudan ting dao Yuzan ji” at [http://zsxiaoyang.blog.hexun.com/25712271\\_d.html](http://zsxiaoyang.blog.hexun.com/25712271_d.html), accessed 10 February, 2011.

<sup>264</sup> These discussions are found on the bulletin boards of websites such as tieba.baidu.com, or some private blogs.

<sup>265</sup> For example, see the blog post of “An chu mi” at [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_558cd4320100fyd2.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_558cd4320100fyd2.html)

between these two works, and to understand that even in Pai's practice, the balance between tradition and innovation is never a fixed formula.

Firstly, the selection of master teachers for *Hairpin* appears to be subject to doubt if checked against Pai's own assertion that the *kunqu* art he is promoting is the most authentic: on the one hand, Pai believes that the most authentic *kunqu* art is from Suzhou, but on the other hand, he has invited two master *kunqu* singers from Shanghai.<sup>266</sup> Within China there are actually many different types of *kunqu* and it is highly disputable as for which can best represent Chinese *kunqu* art.<sup>267</sup> Although Pai has justified his selection of master teachers as "finding the best teachers for the respective plays," this obviously runs contradictory to his own promise of promoting Suzhou *kunqu*. Here the thing that matters is not whether the performing techniques being taught in *Peony* are more "authentic" than in *Hairpin*, but the fact that by teaching these techniques the concept of authentic *kunqu* in his own narrative is confused. Given that his works are watched by such a wide spectrum of audiences, particularly young people who know very little about the opera, this confusion will cause a rather negative impact. This is what a blogger with the pseudonym "Nanbei kun" has speculated: "it is true that Pai's works were trying to introduce the young people to *kunqu*, but sadly they were shown into the wrong door."<sup>268</sup> Obviously, the "wrong door" that the blogger refers to here is the *kunqu* schools that he considers

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<sup>266</sup> Although Hua Wenyi is now residing in the U.S., she once worked in Shanghai *Kunqu* Troupe and is considered a member of the Shanghai school.

<sup>267</sup> Some scholars broadly categorized Chinese *kunqu* into *beikun* (northern *kunqu*) and *nankun* (southern *kunqu*): the former refers to *kunqu* art practiced in Beijing, Tianjin and part of Hebei province, whereas the latter refers to all different *kunqu* styles in the south. See for example Chapter 3 in Niu Biao et al. 1996, and Zhu Junling 2007: 112-118. Other scholars believed that all *kunqu* centers have their own different types of *kunqu*. The centers in the south include Suzhou, Kunshan, Yangzhou, Nanjing, Hangzhou, Shanghai; and centers in the north are Beijing and Tianjin. Due to the influence of local music, performing arts and dialects, *kunqu* in these different places demonstrates very strong local flavour in terms of articulation, singing and acting, percussion, and repertoire plays. See for example Chapter 4 in Song Bo 2005.

<sup>268</sup> "Nanbei kun" is probably the one who criticised Pai's productions most systematically and most bitterly through his web posts. For this quote and other posts, see <http://www.douban.com/group/topic/11874494/>, accessed 11 February 2011.

not authentic, but what Pai was trying to do in *Hairpin* seems to become preserving the best *kunqu* skills, whatever schools they come from.

Secondly, after the experiment in *Peony*, Pai now coined the term “new *kunqu* aesthetics” (*xin meixue*) for his production, and defined it as “the combination of tradition and modernity” (*chuantong yu xiandai de ronghe*) (Pai 2010: 6-7). But this aesthetic principle is highly fluid and offers much flexibility in its application. If we examine the functioning of this principle in both works, we will notice the change: on the one hand, in both works the “tradition” aspect is represented by the singing and acting techniques that the young actors learned from master teachers. With these teachers from different artistic lineages, the skills are presumably distinct with their respective styles; on the other hand, the aspect of “modernity” is expressed through whatever elements he sees fit for the purpose of linking the adaptations to modern audiences, for example, the “youth” theme, and the many cultural icons in the innovative stage setting process. These choices are dependant on the needs of each work so there hasn’t been any fixed standard for the practice. Pai saw these innovations as highly necessary, as his works are to be staged in proscenium theatre. The reform of stage setting would be crucial for attracting a large number of young audiences (Pai 2010: 7). In this sense, each of Pai’s works has become an entity that features a collage of cultural materials which are traditionally unrelated.

If we examine the production of *Hairpin* with the tradition versus innovation discourse, we will find that in fact Pai’s production strategy in this work is basically the same as that used in *Peony*. On the “tradition” aspect, Pai continued to present the best possible, or mostly accepted, singing and acting skills taught by renowned masters. On the other hand, he also sought to add “modern” elements so as to attract

modern audiences – particularly by emphasizing the visual aspect. Yet what should be added and how is the key issue. As in *Hairpin*, he adopted some “traditional” cultural icons, such as calligraphic works and zither, rather than anything purely modern. This special choice added to the complexity of the work’s combination of traditional and modern elements, and stirred up very different responses as shown above.

In essence, Pai’s principle hasn’t altered the innate values of the *kunqu* art conventions, yet it has significantly expanded the expression of these values. Traditionally, the consumption of *kunqu* is supposed to be the enjoyment of the audio-visual-textual combination, with the singing and orchestration as the most important part. In Pai’s work, however, the visual aspect is greatly extended by the creation of a new stage setting. In these works, the audiences not only enjoy the performance of the singers, but also the large scrolls of calligraphy erected on the stage, Chinese paintings projected onto the backdrop, and the new choreography of the dances. The very idea of using such elements, particularly those not adopted in traditional performances, is in fact a contradiction of the concept of abstractness. The use of Buddhist images is in itself the visualization of the content related to religion, and such materialization is definitely contradictory to abstractness.

## **5.2. *The Palace of Eternal Youth*: Being as Traditional as Possible**

*The Palace of Eternal Youth* (*Changsheng dian*) is publicly recognized as another classical *kunqu* play, and it has been one of the most staged works in *kunqu* history. During the past decade, it was mounted twice as a complete-play production, and the one in discussion here is directed by Gu Duhuang, an active

*kunqu* promoter from Suzhou.<sup>269</sup> The reason why I choose to analyse this work is not because it has been produced under the influence of Pai's *Peony* – it appeared two months earlier than *Peony* – but because the general rules of production for both works bear some similarities. By comparing it with *Peony*, we will discover on the one hand how the relationship between tradition and innovation is perceived by the conservationists (represented by Gu), and on the other hand what a difference the promotion mechanisms adopted for *Peony*, such as name-recognition and modern media exposure, are capable of making in the distribution of a stage work.

Gu's *Palace* was also produced under the cross-Strait collaboration aiming to expand the audience base and to present *kunqu* art on the international stage.<sup>270</sup> It was produced under the financial sponsorship of Taiwan entrepreneur Chen Qide.<sup>271</sup> Gu Duhuang is one of the few well-known *kunqu* experts within China. According to one of his biographical accounts, he is a retired member of the Suzhou *Kunqu* Troupe, and has dedicated his time to *kunqu* promotion since the early 1980s through various projects such as re-establishing the Suzhou *Kunqu* Training School, organizing training classes for young actors, and even collaborating with institutions of higher learning to nurture college students majoring in *kunqu* art (Fan Ning 2009: 25).

Gu explained that *kunqu* art is a high art rather than a mass entertainment form – this is its best quality, but not a drawback, so it should be maintained. According to this, Gu believed that the most urgent task in *kunqu* preservation is to inherit and save all performances from the old performers who are still alive, and to “purify” (*chunhua*) these performances. (Fan Ning 2009: 26). In contrast, Pai believed that

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<sup>269</sup> The major production team members for Gu's work include: director: Gu Duhuang; stage and costume designer: Ye Jintian; artistic consultant: Wang Qimei.

<sup>270</sup> See Guo Jia, “Jie yuan Kunqu mo xiangfu, Mudan ting qi san sheng lu”, *Beijing Youth Daily*, 28 October 2004.

<sup>271</sup> Chen Qide is CEO of Chien Kuo Construction Company and director of Taiwan Rock Publishing International.

audience construction is the most important task, and because of this, innovations can be made during stage productions.

In 2001, Gu Duhuang organized several *kunqu* stage shows performed by Suzhou singers and toured around Taiwan. The distinctive traditional flavour of their works caused a great sensation among the local audiences. This earned him sponsorship from Chen Qide, who was determined to contribute to *kunqu* preservation. *Palace* was selected and both Gu and Chen Qide share the same vision that this play should be restored to its “original form.”<sup>272</sup>

Written by Qing dynasty dramatist and poet Hong Sheng (1645-1704), *The Palace of Eternal Youth* is a 50-scene hefty tome that tells of a death-transcending love tragedy between a Tang Dynasty (618-907) emperor Li Longji and his concubine Yang Yuhuan. The story is set against the historical backdrop of the rise and fall of the Tang dynasty, particularly its decline due to rebellions. Because of her beauty and great talents in singing and dancing, Yang becomes the most favoured consort of the emperor. The empire gradually falls due to a range of social problems which arise while the emperor indulges his infatuation with beauty and romance and the governance deteriorates. Eventually rebellions break out, and as they flee the capital city, the concubine is forced by the emperors’ enraged generals to hang herself – a result of a grudge which has grown over a long period of time, and of resentment and anger. The emperor never forgets Yang and constantly mourns her death. Finally, after the death of the emperor, the couple reunite in the Moon Palace.

As the artistic director of this adaptation, Gu Duhuang trimmed the total number of 50 scenes of the original script down to an essential 27, and the entire 7.5-

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<sup>272</sup> See “Qiyejia Chen Qide de dameng: Jiangsu sheng Kunju yishutuan quanben Changsheng Dian”, *Biaoyan yishu*, February 2004.

hour performance was divided into three instalments. During this revision, the theme of romance was highlighted, while most of the scenes that deal with the rise and fall of the dynasty against the historical background was left out. Although a thematic choice is inevitable when the size of the work has to be significantly condensed, some critics regretted that by excluding the narrative of the turbulent history behind the romance, the sublime nature of the play was largely undermined (Wang Anqi 2004: 35-36).

World renowned Hong Kong costume designer Ye Jintian (or Kam-Tim Yip)<sup>273</sup> joined the *Palace* production team as costume and stage designer. He holds a surprisingly similar attitude towards the development of Chinese traditional art to that of Pai Hsien-yung. He was also looking for “something modern and something that Chinese people can be proud of.” Ye acutely pointed out that in today’s Chinese performing art works, one can find no “roots” due to the cultural breakdown during Chinese history. In his eyes, *kunqu* art is very fragile in modern society, so “if we can not make it grow, we should preserve its most beautiful moments as an opera, to keep it as it was in the late Ming dynasty.” However, Ye did not see tradition as fossilized. He believed that time revolves in a cycle, and he did not see strong contrast between tradition and modernity. He believes that in order to preserve the beauty of art, one would need to preserve its tradition but at the same time to pursue innovation.<sup>274</sup> To him, tradition possesses a dynamic which provides the possibility of development and of establishing its relevance to modern society, and even to the future. Here, Ye’s quest for cultural roots and for establishing a sense of identity and

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<sup>273</sup> In 2001, Ye Jintian was winner of Best Art Director on the 74th Academy Awards and Best Costume Designer by the British Academy Film and Television Arts Awards for the movie *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. He is also known in the world for his costume designing for many film and theatre works.

<sup>274</sup> See We Ye, “Ye Jintian: dang zhongguo ren kaishi jue de shoushang, jiu hui you gaibian”, *China Newsweek*, 13 November 2006.



sense of belonging strongly resonates with Pai's vision in *kunqu* preservation. This vision is rather contradictory to his assertion that the Ming dynasty original form of *kunqu* should be presented. As will be shown below, what Ye was striving to preserve were only some of the *kunqu* conventions and aesthetic elements that he considered to be crucial.

In practice, Ye established his own standard: through his design, he wanted to make this stage work demonstrate more completeness, more vividness, and more simplicity, to make the work as traditional as possible (Zhang Hong 2005: 59). To achieve this goal, Ye designed about 140 sets of costumes for *Palace* based on illustrations in a book of opera singers portraits from the Qing dynasty. He did, however, make many changes in the colours, embroidery works, and fabrics. Because almost half of the 27 scenes involve the depiction of ghosts and supernatural beings, Ye also redesigned images for these characters.<sup>275</sup>

Ye's designs aroused very different responses and criticisms. Zhang Weidong rigorously accused the new costume design and text revision of the play in *Palace*. He firmly believed that the only acceptable way of preserving *kunqu* art is to strictly and unconditionally pass down what the old *kunqu* masters practiced and acted (Zhang Weidong 2007). In defence, Gu Duhuang claimed that this play is very "traditional," because they have kept three elements unchanged: music, orchestration, and performing style.<sup>276</sup> Again this controversy can be boiled down to the very fundamental dispute over the scope of "tradition".

From 17 to 22 February 2004, *Palace* premiered at Novel Hall for Performing arts, Taipei and the performances were a resounding success, and immediately

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<sup>275</sup> For these details, see Zhang Hong 2005: 59-60.

<sup>276</sup> Fan Ning, "Gu Duhuang: yuan zhi yuan wei Kunju meng", *Guangming ribao*, 11 June 2008.

afterwards, the play toured around the island for another six rounds of performances. During the following three years, it was brought to audiences in Beijing, Shanghai and Hong Kong for over 40 rounds (Fan Ning 2007). Then in January 2007, this play was invited to attend the Belgian Art Festival which marked its first tour outside China. The three nights of performance at the Opéra Royal de Wallonie in Liège saw over 80% of seat occupancy, and were immensely enjoyed by the local audiences.<sup>277</sup>

In contrast to Pai's ambition to link the preservation of *kunqu* art to the revival of traditional Chinese culture, Gu Duhuang focuses mainly on *kunqu* preservation per se, a task that in his eyes cannot afford any further delays (in Fan Ning 2007: 26). In fact, Gu has taken on this task as his life-long responsibility, and the following quote reveals this to us:

*Kunqu* as cultural heritage that conveys the wisdom of ancient people needs to be protected and inherited. If I go in for artistic creation, *kunqu* is not necessarily my first choice, and if I need to produce a *kunqu* work that can bring all my creativity into full play, I can produce a very new play. However, the sense of responsibility (for *kunqu* preservation) does not allow me to do so...people today do not treat the tradition with awe (Fan Ning 2007: 75).

Gu has a very clear plan for this preservation, and the most urgent step is to help pass down a number of *kunqu* plays, particularly the signature excerpted-scenes (*zhezi xi*) performances, from old actors through audio and video recordings or master-student training schemes. He believes that only when this has been done, can one start to make adaptations of other *kunqu* and literary works for stage production. Gu's greatest wish is to establish a private *kunqu* troupe that is "not necessarily the best in China but should be a troupe that is capable of providing audiences with the "most traditional" and "most pure" *kunqu* performance"(Fan Ning 2007: 26-27). The mounting of *Palace* can be taken as an example of his endeavours in this direction.

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<sup>277</sup> "Kunqu Changsheng Dian hongdong bilishi", 17 January 2007, *People's Daily* (overseas version).

Gu's *Palace* and Pai's *Peony* bear much resemblance to each other if we look at their lengths and modes of production: firstly, both are produced with entrepreneurial funding through cross-Strait collaborations; then, both works are publicized as complete-play work (*quanben xi*) since they aim to retell the complete stories in the original texts despite the fact that they are abridged works only half the size of the original script. However, they are vastly different in terms of the outcomes and their influence among the public. Of course, it is not justifiable to say that *Peony* is more successful than *Palace* simply because of the greater numbers of audience members it has attracted. What is more meaningful is to find out what lies behind their distinction.

On the level of production, although both Pai and Gu claim their own work to be traditional, the changes and innovations they made are different: in *Peony*, the innovative alterations are seen in text revision, stage setting, costume design and orchestra formation, whereas in *Palace*, changes are found just in text revision and costuming. The most striking difference is probably in the roles Pai and Gu played in the publicity and distribution of their own works. Chapter 3 has shown that Pai spared no efforts to participate in the publicity and performing tours, which is widely acknowledged to have made a great contribution to the popularity of *Peony*. On the contrary, Gu belongs to those "camera-shy" people, and did not involve himself in the marketing and performing tours as much. Instead, highlighting the name of Ye Jintian the "Oscar winner" became a stunt in the publicity campaign,<sup>278</sup> so in a deeper sense, although Gu was not as famous as Pai, his production used a similar

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<sup>278</sup> See Liu Hongqing, "Jiangnan zuìhòu yì gè míngshì", *Beijing Youth Daily*, 23 December 2004.

celebrity promotion strategy, the only difference being that the celebrity here is not the general director but the costume designer.

What is absent from *Palace*'s marketing campaign is not just Gu himself, but also the concept of a "target audience." There was not such a clear plan of focusing on the young audience base and providing what might appeal to them. It is important to note that unlike some other conservationists, such as Zhang Weidong, who oppose any attempts to cater to popular needs, Gu actually agrees that it is necessary to seek the construction of a new audience base. This is why in *Palace*, he reached common ground on the issue of balancing between tradition and innovation: he allowed Ye to make alterations in costume design and image building while making no compromise on the performance itself.

Moreover, in the distribution of *Palace*, there hasn't been a mainstay figure like Pai, who is instrumental for fund-raising – another key factor for materializing the all-round publicity and extensive performing tours. Sharing a common goal of *kunqu* promotion, Gu has selected a totally different road from Pai: he is also trying to publicize *kunqu* among the public, yet through his own "low-key" approach: unlike Pai who takes his production to audiences far and wide, Gu chose to be based in Suzhou, which he sees as the birthplace of *kunqu* art.<sup>279</sup>

In fact, the dilemma does not just involve the choice between *kunqu* and other art forms or between tradition and innovation; there is also the problem of finding the best way to preserve the tradition and to promote *kunqu*. In Gu's case, it is not the fact that he has chosen to preserve the tradition of *Kunqu*, but the way in which he fulfils this aim that is revealing to our discussion: firstly, he allowed innovation in

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<sup>279</sup> See Fan Ning, "Yuanzhi yuanwei Kunqu meng", *Guangming ribao*, 11 June 2008.

certain aspects such as costuming, but this runs contradictory to his own assertion that *Palace* would be “a model of an authentic *kunqu* play” (in Fan Ning 2009: 26); secondly, he is very conscious of the fact that in today’s highly commercialized cultural market, *kunqu* productions need to compete against other forms of entertainment. However, he has not made full use of the available publicity methods that might have brought a much better outcome to the selling of his work. There is no means of knowing exactly why he has chosen not to do so, but indeed this case has revealed such a paradoxical situation that some *kunqu* promoters – especially conservationists – find themselves facing today.

To recap, Gu’s *Palace* was also a large-scale production under private funding and collaboration of artists from both inside and outside Chinese *kunqu* circle. Instead of adopting any particular theme such as Pai’s “youth” theme in *Peony*, this work branded itself as an authentic traditional *kunqu* production. However, innovations were still made in costuming and image building – to a much lesser extent than the changes in stage setting, lighting, costuming, and music in Pai’s *Peony*.

### **5.3. *The Peach Blossom Fan*: Carrying Forward the Youth-theme**

If Pai’s *Peony* introduced the general public to a “youth-themed” *kunqu* production for the first time, Tian Qinxin’s *The Peach Blossom Fan* is the work that greatly enhanced the audiences’ understanding of this brand new approach. In this section, I deal with Tian’s *Fan* produced by Jiangsu Provincial *Kunqu* Troupe because this was the very first state-owned *kunqu* troupe to be fully privatized and commercialized (*shichang hua*). It is worthy of analysis in that as another youth-

themed version production of a classic play, it has revealed how the inspiration drawn from Pai's *Peony* has been flexibly used for domestic-based and self-funded *kunqu* production.<sup>280</sup> In a mere three years after it appeared in 2006, *Fan* grew into another well known *kunqu* stage work and was lauded both for its high box office revenues and its high artistic attainments. Through this case study I wish to explore the viability of a production and distribution scheme similar to Pai's strategy in the discourse of cultural sector reform and state-owned *kunqu* troupe privatization.

*The Peach Blossom Fan* is another classic work in *kunqu* history. Based on real historical characters, it tells a love story, set on the banks of the Qinhuai River in the ancient capital city of Nanjing, between the "Restoration Society" (*Fushe*)<sup>281</sup> scholar Hou Fangyu and the courtesan Li Xiangjun against the background of the fall of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). Unlike some other romance plays, this story not only depicts the love between the protagonists, but also paints the particular ambience in Nanjing during that corrupt historical period: political decadence, regional factions, ideological debates and debauchery. Hou and Li, although they have pledged their love and arranged a marriage, are forced to part from each other due to their unintentional involvement with the political intrigue. Having been through many twists and turns, the two were reunited, but only after the fall of the dynasty. Unlike most *kunqu* stories that conclude with a happy ending (such as the happy reunion of Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei in *Peony*, and the reunion of the Emperor and his concubine in *Palace*), this play ends in a completely different way:

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<sup>280</sup> This work commanded a financial investment of five million yuan, all of which was from Jiangsu Performing Arts Group, the parent company of Jiangsu Provincial *Kunqu* Troupe, and Jiangsu provincial government.

<sup>281</sup> This society is one of the major late Ming literary clubs that was formed by scholars who advocated the high moral and cultural standards and criticized the eunuch political influence and the decadence of the dynasty.

both the lovers, enlightened by a Taoist monk, became religious. (Wang Bin 2007: 8-20)

This new adaptation was directed by Tian Qinxin, an accomplished director of spoken drama from the National Theatre Company of China (*Zhongguo guojia huaju yuan*).<sup>282</sup> Tian's very involvement in this *kunqu* production again proves the tendency that more artists from outside the conventional *kunqu* circle now gained entry into this field, and their participation would presumably accelerate the hybridization trend within *kunqu* development. Tian's *Fan* featured the collaboration between several renowned East Asian scholars and artists: the Taiwanese poet Yu Guangzhong was the literary consultant for text abridgement, Korean theatre director Sohn Jin-chaek who worked as general director of the Seoul World Cup 2002 opening ceremony was the stage consultant, one of China's top lighting designers Xiao Lihe was the stage designer and choreographer, and Japanese musician Seiko Nagaoka wrote the theme music for this production.

When talking about why she had involved herself in *kunqu* production in a Hong Kong Phoenix TV interview (May 2006), Tian Qinxin said that when opportunity arose for her to cooperate with the Jiangsu Performing Arts Group, they had firstly planned to produce a spoken drama, but then she thought of *kunqu* and she knew that Jiangsu Provincial *Kunqu* Troupe within this company boasts some of China's top *kunqu* performers. More importantly, she saw that Pai's *Peony* had swept through the whole nation and established its fame, so she thought that "now a great

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<sup>282</sup> The major production team members include: director: Tian Qinxin; deputy director: Wang Bin; producer: Gu Xin; performing consultant: Zhang Jiqing; script consultant: Yu Guangzhong; stage consultant: Sohn Jin-chaek; academic consultants: Dong Jian, Wu Xiuqing; artistic directors: Shi Xiaomei, Hu Jinfang; music designer: Sun Jian'an; stage and lighting designer: Xiao Lihe; costume designer: Mo Xiaomi. For more details, see Wang Bin 2007: 121.

time has come for the making of *kunqu* productions.”<sup>283</sup> When this play premiered on 17 March 2006 in Beijing, it was received with great acclaim. Tian admitted that she did not find this favourable reception to be a complete surprise, since she thought that traditional Chinese culture is now rejuvenating and that cultural consumption is gradually becoming a habit of some of the public who have high disposable income.<sup>284</sup>

It can be said that Tian’s *Fan* resembles Pai’s *Peony* in many respects: firstly, Pai’s “youth” theme and master-student training scheme, the biggest selling points of *Peony*, were adopted for the production of *Fan*. This work was performed by singers even younger than Pai’s *Peony* cast: the oldest being 21 years of age, and the youngest just 16. To prepare these young singers for the play involved hard work on the part of many artists and masters during the three-month intensive training and rehearsal period, so “inheriting the traditions” was branded as a highlight of this production.<sup>285</sup> Then Pai’s cross-Strait collaboration formula was developed into a “trans-national” collaboration in Tian’s *Fan*, which provides not only the work of highly qualified experts, but also constituted a very important selling point. A similar marketing campaign contributed to the success of the distribution of *Fan*. On the practice level, the conventional singing and acting techniques were faithfully kept in *Fan*, yet innovations were made in stage setting and costume design. The following detailed analysis of the innovations will show that although these changes are different from those in *Peony*, the concept behind is just the same: to draw on the resources of traditional Chinese culture for inspiration, and to make it work towards the overall aesthetics of *kunqu*: elegance and simplicity.

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<sup>283</sup> See “Fang 1699 Taohua shan zhuchuang renyuan”, *Luyu youyue*, Phoenix TV, Hong Kong, 22 May 2006.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid.

<sup>285</sup> See Xu Xin, Wen Songhui, “1699 Taohua shan shangyan chuancheng ban”, *People’s Daily*, 20 March 2006.



Before we come to the analysis of the innovation of stage setting and costume design, it is necessary to point out that Tian Qinxin as the director has shown an attitude of respect towards *kunqu*. She once said, “Facing *kunqu* art, what we can do is to learn from the tradition that our ancestors handed over to us, refer to it, admire it, and most of all, marvel at it” (Yue He 2006: 15). In order to show her respect and admiration for this tradition, Tian added a unique session at the play’s curtain call: all master teachers were invited onto the stage to accept tributes from their students the performers. This, as Tian explained, aims to restore a traditional value that is no longer practiced by today’s young people, and, at the same time, to show to the audiences that these teachers should be credited for their contributions off-stage.<sup>286</sup> Although this practice is a bit different from Pai’s master-student bonding ceremony, both serve to build artistic links between different generations, and emphasize the significance of inheritance and transmission in *kunqu* preservation.

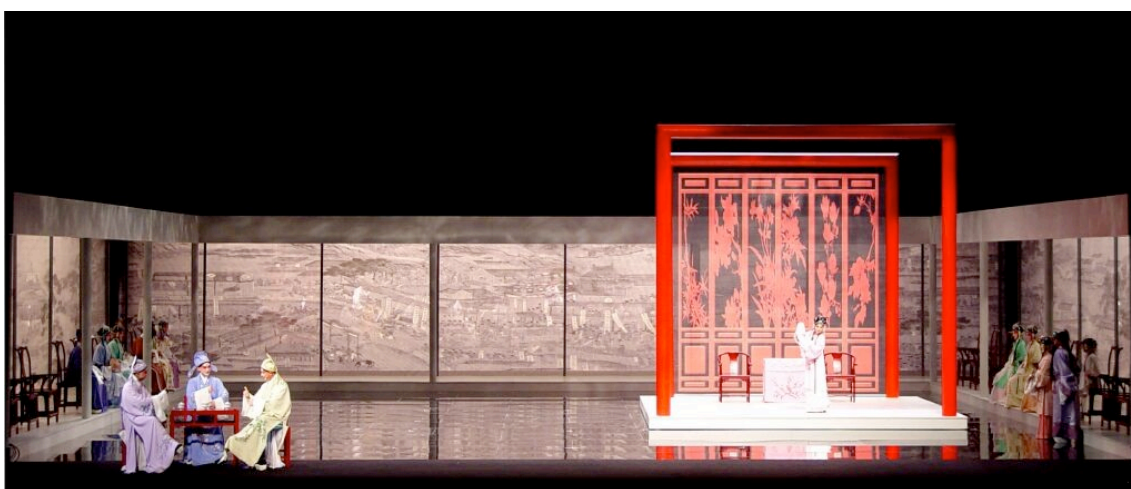
The stage setting, widely taken as one of the strongest points of this play, is a combination of both innovation and tradition. The most prominent creation is definitely the spacing of the stage (see Figure 6): the entire stage is designed to be a “museum in flow” (*liudong de bowuguan*), the “walls” of this “museum” are marked by a gauzy screen set at the far end and on both sides of the stage, and bears an image of a famous antique painting of the Ming capital city Nanjing.<sup>287</sup> At the stage centre is a small pavilion-like platform that functions as a residential hall, or wedding chamber, or royal palace. The central concept of this design is to use these screen walls to mark an exhibition hall, while the central platform is a symbolic replica of

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<sup>286</sup> See “Fang 1699 Taohua shan zhuchuang renyuan”, *Luyu youyue*, Phoenix TV, Hong Kong. 22 May 2006.

<sup>287</sup> This is a masterpiece by Ming Dynasty imperial court painter Qiu Ying: “The portrait of the prosperous southern capital” (*Nandu fanhui tu*). As a national art treasure, the original work of this painting is housed in the Forbidden City Museum.

the ancient Chinese opera stage with three sides open to the audience – a Chinese theatre stage within the modern proscenium stage (in Wang Bin 2007: 88). Lined with mirror-like materials, the stage floor was designed to represent the running Qinhuai River of the capital. In front of the screens on both ends of the stage, there are two rows of Ming-style wooden chairs where the singers can take a seat before or after they perform on the central stage. Musicians and actors getting together their costumes and props behind the backdrop screen can be easily seen when the front stage lights dim.



**Figure 6** The Stage setting of Tian Qinxin's *1699 The Peach Blossom Fan*.

Source: <http://culture.people.com.cn/GB/22226/103126/103156/7731136.html>, accessed 10 May 2011.

According to stage designer Xiao Lihe, a greater part of her stage design involves not only the performing activities but also the spectating activities. Xiao (Wang Bin 2007: 89-91) explained in detail how the different spaces, divided by the screen walls, backdrop, and the central stage frame are meant to function. In this design, the function and connotation of some elements are easy to appreciate, such as the traditional setting of one table flanked with two chairs at the centre, the red colour of the posts of the central stage frame, and the screen walls. However, the

functions and meaning of some other elements are highly implicit and the appreciation of them demands spectators to use their imagination: for instance, according to Xiao, the glassy floor does not only represents the Qinhuai River but also the flow of history; the entire stage is a multi-functional space: it represents a traditional Chinese courtyard, or a Chinese-style performing stage, or a museum; the central stage and its surrounding space form a kind of contradictory but interchangeable *yin/yang* and visionary/real relationships (Wang Bin: 90-91). Through this design, the functionality of the traditional stage is significantly enriched; many layers of meaning are created, mixed and transformed through the newly-added, various stage setting elements as an addition to the overall cultural connotations of the entire performance work. This marked a major distinction between this work and Pai's *Peony*: while Pai only used simple cultural icons, Xiao attempts to create a much more complex and dynamic mix of symbols that can communicate and interact with each other so as to present to the audiences a matrix of meanings about traditional culture and history.

All these stage design concepts are indeed quite original, but criticism of the floor design by a careful audience poignantly revealed an issue which may have been seemingly overlooked by the designer: the design may have been artistically unique, but may not have been very suitable or safe for the actors. Blogger "An chu mi"<sup>288</sup> observed that at a performance of this play at the National Centre of Performing Arts, the slippery glassy stage floor prevented the actors from fighting and jumping freely in the martial scenes.<sup>289</sup>

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<sup>288</sup> A majority of the critical sources I use for Tian's *Fan* are from news reports and performance reviews from newspapers, new websites, internet forums, and individual blogs. An chu mi's comments on the stage floor design is the only criticism on this aspect that I can find.

<sup>289</sup> See "Tian Qinxin, wo xiang zhao nin tui le zhe zhang Kunqu piao",

Then where have all these ideas originated from? If we consider the miniature stage pavilion, the glassy floor and the enlarged copy of the antique painting on the screen walls in this play, and the calligraphic works, paintings, Buddhist concepts in Pai's *Peony* and *Hairpin*, it is not difficult to see that all these innovative ideas were drawn from the original scripts: the historical setting, the religious background, even the identity of the protagonists can all offer inspiration. These elements have not been emphasized in any previous versions, but now they are singled out, amplified and publicized as strong features of these new adaptations. The enriched stage vocabulary signifies the tendency to interpret a *kunqu* work through means other than the performance itself. This is one of the most noticeable innovations in *kunqu* productions in recent years.

The costume design by Mo Xiaomin is another instance that bears a strong mark of the designer's personal interpretation. The colours of costumes are picked from several major colour palettes so as to categorize the main characters into different recognizable groups – scholars, courtesans, officials and warriors, each colour range signifying a particular group of characters. Just as in *Peony*, different colours are used to suit the identity and temperament of different characters (Wang Bin 2007: 92-94). The cut of most costumes followed the conventional style, but alterations were seen in the dressing of a few characters, such as the relegated official, and besieged general. In order to highlight the change of situation that these characters are involved in, Mo discarded the traditional costume assignment and used something unconventional. This again is seen in the costume design in *Peony* and *Hairpin*.

Tian's production team have enjoyed a relaxed social environment in which they are free to display their creativity. Perhaps the words of the stage consultant Sohn Jin-chaek can explain why such an environment prevails. When talking about the relationship between tradition and innovation, Sohn says that there is no need to take the maintenance of authenticity as the ultimate aim of artistic production, because "this is something that is never to be achieved," so for him, bringing innovative practice to the conservation of authentic flavours is to install new life into operatic art, and keep it relevant to the rapidly changing social reality (Wang Bin 2007: 84).

According to the producer, this play is aimed to fulfil an even higher goal than that of *Pai*: to help set the trend for the modern public's cultural consumption, to contribute to the return of traditional art to the mainstream (art) in China, and to explore the international market (Gu Xin in Wang Bin 2007: 44-47). Obviously, the aims are two-fold: cultural and commercial. This is determined by the already shifted identity of the company: after having been privatized in 2005, Jiangsu Performing Arts Group has to depend solely on its own efforts and success in market competition for survival and prosperity. They are required to be more proactive and to package their cultural products in a sellable format while still abiding by the state cultural policies. Under these circumstances, therefore, the company set the guiding principle for the production of *Fan* as "making it popular, reflecting mainstream value in it, and building up competence in the international market" (in Wang Bin 2007: 45-46). To achieve this goal, the company has mobilized its best human resources: Jiangsu Provincial *Kunqu* Troupe is responsible for actor training, rehearsal, while Jiangsu

Performing Arts Cultural Production Company is responsible for the publicity and distribution of the work.

Just as in the distribution of Pai's *Peony*, modern publicity strategies have functioned as indispensable factors for the success of *Fan*'s tour performances. As a key experimental project, the production process of this play has been closely monitored not only by Jiangsu provincial government, but also by the central government of Beijing. To maximize the effect of publicity, a comprehensive campaign of promotion was planned to involve both Chinese state and local media and English language media to form a network that would cover both the domestic and international markets. The one-year-long media campaign was formally launched on 18 May 2005, the fifth anniversary of *kunqu* having been proclaimed by UNESCO as intangible cultural heritage. It is self-evident that the choice of this special date revealed the company's plan to situate this production into the country's cultural heritage preservation context. Then, during the following months, different themes were highlighted in each wave of publicity activities. These themes include: a multi-national production team, good-looking young lead singers, the "mobile *kunqu* museum" stage setting, the authenticity of the music, the hand-embroidery features of the costumes, and the replica of the national treasure painting scroll. As with the publicity campaign of Pai's *Peony*, the marketing of *Fan* involved both traditional printing media and other multi-media presence.

When Tian's *Fan* premiered in Beijing in 2006 to packed audiences, among the VIP guests there were not only representatives from theatres and art festivals from Japan, Korea, U.S. and Europe, but also top leaders from the central

government.<sup>290</sup> No explanations have been provided why these top leaders and high officials were present at the premiere, but one of the reasons might be that this is a major stage work produced by the first privatized *kunqu* troupe since *kunqu* was designated as world cultural heritage. This government endorsement offered legitimacy to this mode of production, and is also largely indicative of the state policy towards *kunqu* development at present.

What *Fan*'s well-earned popularity reveals to us is not just the practicability of an experimental production and publicity scheme inspired by *Pai*'s earlier practice, it also points to the positioning of *kunqu* art that has been caught between today's cultural heritage preservation and cultural reform. The mainland *kunqu* troupe restructuring and privatization within the broader range of China's cultural sector reform that has been taking place in recent years has exerted great impact on *kunqu* development: the changed managerial structure of the institutions means a change not just in repertoire building, performance arrangement, salary payments, but also change for the future of *kunqu*. This privatization and marketization brings a two-fold effect to the development of the troupe: on the one hand, they gain more freedom of choice on what to produce and how to distribute, but on the other hand, their subsistence and developments rely solely on their own profits from the market. This brings both incentive and pressure.

Therefore, with this structural reform and privatization, we see the arrival of *kunqu*'s direct confrontation with a substantial social force unleashed from the reform process that has already transformed much of the social environment in which

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<sup>290</sup> These officials include: CCP Standing Committee member Li Changchun, Minister of Department of Propaganda Liu Yunshan, State Councillor Chen Zhili, Minister of Culture Sun Jiazheng, Jiangsu Provincial CCP Secretary General Li Yuanchao, and Jiangsu Provincial Governor Liang Baohua. See Zhang Hao & Zhuang Wei 2006: 2.

*kunqu* exists today. What would be the outcome? How well would *kunqu* adjust itself to it and how much of it would be transformed? Most *kunqu* troupes have not been privatized, but are already on the threshold of the change. It seems clear that the commercialization of *kunqu* art is taking place under the circumstances of the reconfiguration of China's cultural industry market.

Compared with Pai's *Peony*, Tian Qinxin's *Fan* demonstrates a distinctive balance between tradition and innovation. The actors' singing and acting was where *kunqu* conventions were sustained; the "flavour" was kept as original as possible through the rigid training by master teachers. Innovations bear the clear mark of more novel interpretations of traditional opera aesthetics. The high visibility of master teachers, for example at the curtain calls, highlights this production's dedication to *kunqu* inheritance, thus it fits perfectly well into the national cultural heritage preservation context. This in turn offers it justification and helps it earn support from the government.

#### **5.4. High-end Productions: the Revival of *Kunqu* as an Elite Opera?**

In this section, I will analyse a more recent distinctive *kunqu* production mode in which a stage work is "transplanted" from the conventional venue of a theatre to high-end club houses, restaurants, and even garden settings. This discussion will reveal to us that as *kunqu* attracts more attention from the general public, its commercial value has now started to be explored by business people through their collaboration with artists and *kunqu* professionals. I intend to seek an understanding of the similarities and differences between these variant productions and those more conventional, theatre-based productions, and what effects these new



productions have upon our (re)definition of today's *kunqu* preservation and development. The examples involved in this discussion fall into two broad categories: *kunqu* works performed in luxury restaurants and clubs, and those in the natural setting of Jiangnan gardens. As with the previous cases, I will put emphasis on both production and marketing strategies.

### ***Wang Xiang's Granary-version of Peony***

A so-called "Royal granary version" (*huangjia liangcang ban*)<sup>291</sup> of *The Peony Pavilion* came out in May 2007 in Beijing and hit the market with a splash. It is probably the most discussed *kunqu* stage work of its kind in recent years and is aimed at high-profile audiences. The most eye-catching gimmick of this work is "to abandon the theatre stage production mode and return to the practice of Ming dynasty family-band performance."<sup>292</sup> The venue of this work is a 300-square-metre house of a Ming dynasty royal granary complex sitting close to the Forbidden City in downtown Beijing. A historical monument now under the management of the municipal government with a history of around six hundred years, this complex has witnessed the history of the ancient capital city of Beijing. Wang Xiang,<sup>293</sup> the producer of this *kunqu* work, had valued the cultural significance of this building when he decided to lease it for a business venture. It was a personal encounter with *kunqu* performance that finalized Wang's decision to mount a *kunqu* production at this venue. In his understanding, *kunqu* art is not as out-dated as it is held to be in the general public's stereotypical view, and he developed a strategy to sell the opera

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<sup>291</sup> In some sources, this production was also referred to as the "guest-hall version" (*tingtang ban*). Major production team members of this work are: producer: Wang Xiang; general director: Wang Shiyu; artistic director: Lin Zhaohua; performing consultants: Zhang Jiqing, Wang Shiyu; script consultant: Yu Qiuyu.

<sup>292</sup> "Lin Zhaohua dazao tingtang ban Mudan ting", *Xin jing bao*, 13 May 2007.

<sup>293</sup> Wang Xiang is the general manager of a Beijing cultural entertainment company: PoloArts Entertainment Co. Ltd.

performance in this historical building by highlighting the similar history of *kunqu* art and of the granary – both from the Ming dynasty – the granary hall makes a perfect venue for small-scale performance. The Ming dynasty private opera performance became a convenient concept, and he decided to develop the hall into a perfect environment to revive the early tradition of *kunqu* family troupe performance (Lao Mu 2008: 29). Through this production, Wang aimed to reintroduce a leisure consumption practice that was very popular among the well-off families during the Ming and early Qing times when they liked to entertain family friends and guests with *kunqu* performances by their own family-run troupes.<sup>294</sup> What Wang planned to do was to revitalize a particular family entertainment practice that had long been abandoned since family troupes were banned by the Qing rules. This approach has marked a unique perspective to produce a *kunqu* work: what is emphasized as tradition here is not the “authentic” performance conventions per se, but a particular entertainment that features *kunqu* performances.

What lies behind this scheme is the lucrative commercial prospect brought about by the Chinese people’s pursuit of cultural revival and a new trend of seeking luxury in the cultural market. Wang Xiang believed that the people of China today have started to look for their own native culture that can counteract the onslaught of Western cultures. He observed that in this process what the country needs are those who are both successful in business and are sensitive to the arts. Wang saw that today’s China is going through a cultural revival, and he called himself a businessman involved in this process.<sup>295</sup>

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<sup>294</sup> “Lin Zhaohua dazao tingtang ban Mudan ting”, *Xin jing bao*, 13 May 2007.

<sup>295</sup> Cited in Han Yonghong, “Gu cangku tingtang yan Kunqu Mudan ting, wenyi shangren dazao xuan wenhua”, *Lianhe zaobao*, 1 February 2009.

From the outset, Wang Xiang had a very clear guiding principle for the work: he wanted to provide the best art to today's elite class: from the scenes selected for this work to the performing venue, and from cast team to the targeted audiences, he has ensured that everything/every artist is the best.<sup>296</sup> This production is tailor-made to attract business elites rather than intellectual elites: the high ticket price sets an initial threshold for the audiences, and keeps the 'wallet shy' from attending this show.<sup>297</sup> As a deft exponent of cultural economy, Wang Xiang believed that in today's China there is the need to produce an art form that suits a minority of the public.<sup>298</sup> This, as we can see, is in fact a purely commercial strategy – in this project, *kunqu* art is made into a luxury product for those who can afford it. And this project is a commercially motivated project rather than culturally motivated, since for this production the primary goal is commercial success but not the revival of *kunqu* as cultural heritage. What Wang did was just to use the cultural arguments to justify his commercial enterprise.

This production boasts a very strong production team: the renowned Chinese writer and cultural scholar Yu Qiuyu was invited to be literary consultant, leading Chinese spoken drama director Lin Zhaohua was the general artistic supervisor, Zhang Jiqing and Wang Shiyu, the two master teachers for Pai's *Peony*, were the teachers for the lead singers from Wang's cast, and Wang Shiyu was also the general director of this work. What Wang Xiang wanted to produce is "neither a purely modern theatre (*xiju*) work, nor a pure opera (*xiqu*) work – it should be a combination of both" (Lao Mu 2008: 29). This is why he invited the avant-garde

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<sup>296</sup> See Niu Chunmei, "1/7 bu Mudan ting yanchu 336 chang, san nian zong piaofang 1695 wan yuan", *Beijing ribao*, 20 May 2010.

<sup>297</sup> Its best seats are sold at the high price of 1980 yuan (i.e. about £190) and the cheapest price is 380 yuan.

<sup>298</sup> See news report "Zongyi kuaibao" at China Central TV Channel 3, 21 May 2007.

spoken drama director Lin Zhaohua and the renowned *kunqu* master Wang Shiyu<sup>299</sup> He wanted to combine the expertise of both directors yet produce a stage work that is artistically competent and commercially viable. As the general producer of this play, Wang Xiang is conscious of his responsibility to steer the direction of this play as a commercial production (Lao Mu 2008).

Lin Zhaohua, known for his avant-garde experimentalism in spoken drama, said that he is rather conservative in opera reform, and wanted to keep the good things that have been passed down from older generations, and only develop once he is sure that the essence has been retained. Therefore, the principle that was set for this production is that the main scenes from the original text of the play must be included.<sup>300</sup>

According to most available sources, this work seems to have offered its audiences a brand-new experience, even though the acting and singing of the young actors, as a result of the master teachers' training, has attempted to reflect faithfully traditional *kunqu* performing conventions. This aspect, I would believe, is this production's only and most obvious relation to *kunqu* art. The newness of the work, on the other hand, is seen through the innovative use of the performing and audience spaces and the "stage" setting. In fact, the word "stage" does not really apply to this work because in the granary there is no real stage; instead, the east end of the hall is lined with a large red carpet that marks the performing area, at the same time

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<sup>299</sup> Li Zhaohua, a famous Chinese spoken drama director from Beijing People's Art Theatre, is known for his avant-garde and experimental in his works. Although I am not able to find any source that specifically explains why Lin as a spoken drama director would embark on Wang's *kunqu* project, his career path offers some hint: apart from spoken drama products, Lin also produced stage works of other operatic and theatrical genres, such as Peking opera, Anhui opera, Western opera, and vocal concerts. Wang Shiyu, as we have learned from Chapter 3, is a master *kunqu* singer and have been very active in *kunqu* preservation in recent years. Obviously, his contribution in this project is on the opera (*xiqu*) aspects, whereas Lin on the theatre (*xiju*) aspects.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid.

marking a symbolic return to the Ming dynasty performance when red carpets marked the performing area in a private residential hall.

Unlike Pai who has stressed his upholding of the *kunqu* aesthetics of simplicity and elegance, Wang did not promise fidelity to *kunqu* conventions in every aspect, and this rendered him the freedom of experimenting with more bold and innovative ideas to enrich the overall spectating experience of his audiences. The most prominent innovative ideas can be seen from the following two examples. The clear division between the performing area and audience area is blurred by the use of space during the show: at the west end of the hall there stands a wooden pavilion as an important stage set. All 63 audience seats flank the aisle that links the pavilion and the red carpet on the opposite end of the hall. At times, the flutist and singers will come onto the carpet by walking through the aisle. Apart from this spacing technique, the most discussed feature of this work is the construction of the special atmosphere that suits certain scenes of the performance: the eight fish tanks containing goldfish dotted around the hall are probably the most ingenious part of the design. At the scene “Interrupted Dream” (*jingmeng*), flower petals fall from above the performing area, and at “The Soul Departs” (*lihun*), drops of water drip into the fish tanks thus signifying the scene taking place on a rainy night.

Unlike most shows at a theatre, the performance is preceded by a buffet dinner called “peony dinner” (*mudan yan*) offered in another hall adjacent to the actual performance hall. While they eat, the diners-cum-audience members are able to gather information from several LCD screens about the procedures of the singers’ pre-preparations, such as the application of makeup, and stage setting.

The publicity of the “exclusiveness” of this production obviously indicated the tactical appropriation of the Ming dynasty scholarly practice of *kunqu* appreciation at private venues into today’s popular cultural consumption. The modern audiences of this production don’t have to worry about the difficult lyrics, since surtitles are provided on the LCD screens. The publicity on the playbill says,

Ultimate landscape of Chinese culture, a must-see for business elites in Beijing. Imperial Granary, the oldest theatre in Peking, *kunqu*, the utmost Chinese elegance, both since the 15<sup>th</sup> century: a perfect combination of material cultural heritage and non-material cultural heritage (in Zheng Xiaolin 2007: 18).

Another unique publicity strategy was also instrumental in building up the reputation of this work. The first ten performances were played free to VIP guests: celebrities from the cultural circle, entertainment circle, diplomatic luminaries in Beijing, and some “white-collar” representatives. Word-of-mouth very soon created a growing audience base. Within less than two years after its debut, the play has been performed for over 200 times, and has earned a total amount of 5.4 million yuan.<sup>301</sup>

Like a luxury branded commodity that offers only “limited-edition,” Wang Xiang’s *Peony* becomes a highly desirable “experience” not just among the business elites, but also for anyone with an acute desire for cultural production (and is financially able to attend , of course.)

As Goodman (2001: 247) observes, during the 1990s, Chinese culture became less didactic and more concerned with entertainment, more commercialized and more marketable. This trend has actually been further developed into the twenty-first century, and is applicable for our discussion about *kunqu* development. The

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<sup>301</sup> Niu Chunmei, “Tingtang ban Mudan ting weimei yanchu 200 chang guanyan guo wan”, *Beijing ribao*, 2 April 2009.

exploration of *kunqu*'s commercial value now seems to be placed in a more important position, particularly for privatized enterprises and cultural businesses.

On the question of whether Wang Xiang's production is essentially commercial or cultural in nature, Tian Qing, Director of the Protection Centre of Intangible Culture Heritage (*Zhongguo feiwuzhi wenhua yichan baohu zhongxin*), China Academy of Art Research, held that, "I take it as a cultural behaviour. Besides, how can arts be maintained without business? *Kunqu* is a refined art, so this edition has chosen a correct path to aim at a minority of the public."<sup>302</sup>

A majority of the celebrity audiences expressed favourable comments on this production, some enjoying the legendary romance and the classical environment, others praising the elegant performances, but a lot of them lauding the creativity of this production and its significance for the conservation of *kunqu* art as cultural heritage.<sup>303</sup>

At the same time, however, this high-end production strategy was bitterly criticized by others. The high price aroused immediate controversy among the general public and many doubted if this production would exist for long. Based on the ground that *kunqu* as cultural heritage now belongs to the entire world, they argue that *kunqu* should not be appropriated as a gimmick for the business needs of a few and should not be exploited as a "cash-cow". They warned that:

Such thousand-yuan tickets beyond the general public's purchasing power not only create the illusion of a prosperous public cultural market, but also encourage the extravagance of stage production. They even pose a challenge to the harmony of society. The art is people's art, and the stage is the people's stage. They should not

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<sup>302</sup> Xu Xuemei, "Tingtang ban Mudan ting changzhu Beijing, gaojia piao du xiang zungui", at <http://culture.people.com.cn/GB/5753998.html>, accessed 15 February 2011.

<sup>303</sup> For a detailed account of these plaudits, see Wang Run, "Mingjia mingshi huiju huangjia liangcang, gong shang tingtang ban Mudan ting," *Beijing wanbao*, 09 December 2008.

be degraded as the ‘captive’ art for the few, or even a platform for personal exchange.<sup>304</sup>

On this point, the supporters contended that the high price of this production is reasonable. They believed that as long as there are buyers, the price is not unreasonable.<sup>305</sup>

Wang Xiang’s *Peony* earned the recognition of Beijing municipal government, and was recognised as “the best cultural creative industry programme” by Beijing Cultural and Creative Industry Promotion Centre.<sup>306</sup> The municipal government also utilized this production as a tool for cultural promotion. During the 2008 Olympic season, the Olympics Organization Committee booked some of their performances to entertain official delegates and athletes from over the world.

Here it is important to point out that the government support for this commercially-oriented, luxury production obviously runs contrary to the nature of its cultural heritage preservation project that aims to promote *kunqu* as popular art for the general public. Does this support signify that the government has now turned to support luxury, elite art for the few rather than the popular art for the public? Why is it that Wang’s production has earned mainstream credibility? In fact, it is not too difficult to answer this question once we see the two basic elements lying behind it: one is the PRC government’s pursuit of cultural market prosperity and the conservation of traditional culture – Wang’s production, together with the other *kunqu* works discussed here, fits very well into this context; and the other is the rise of such a business “elite class” together with their awakening needs for high-end

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<sup>304</sup> This is the only criticism on Wang Xiang’s *Peony* I can find so far. See Lü Shaogang, “Yishu qineng gaojia huanyang zai tingtang?” at <http://culture.people.com.cn/GB/46104/46105/5754629.html>, accessed 15 February, 2011.

<sup>305</sup> Wang Run, “Tai gao le zhongguo chuantong yishu de shenjia, kan xi daodi gai duo gui?”, *Beijing wanbao*, 16 July 2007.

<sup>306</sup> “Important events of POLO Arts” on the company’s homepage: <http://poloarts.com.cn/>, accessed 16 February 2011.



cultural consumption. What Wang has done is simply the timely use of such an opportunity. Yet Wang is not the only one who has such a sensibility towards the cultural outlook and future trend. Within only one or two years time, there have emerged a few more *kunqu* productions, all of which quickly made their own claim to the market share, and largely contributed to the visibility of this new trend.

### ***Cai Ming's Club-version Kunqu***

While Wang Xiang's granary-version *Peony* continued to make high profits by attracting more people to pay for an experience of Ming-style private *kunqu* enjoyment, another production appeared which pushed Wang's "cultural homage" even further back in history: it promised a distinctive experience of the ancient literati's lifestyle, and a pursuit of the most typical Chinese cultural values. Although not clearly declared so, it would function as a sanctuary in the metropolis seeking to gather together people with the same dream and ambition of becoming Chinese literati in modern society. This is Cai Ming's high-end club-version *kunqu*.<sup>307</sup> In December 2008, a high class Chinese-style business club named "Nine Dynasty Club" (*Jiuchao Hui*) was launched in Beijing Chaoyang District by a successful businessman Cai Ming, the general director of Boloni Home Decor Group, one of the largest furnishing companies in China. Cai Ming had the ambition of creating a "cultural brand" that belongs exclusively to China and has its distinctive "cultural philosophy". He believed that, "Nine Dynasty Club is such a brand. With *kunqu* performances, art gallery, book store, tea room, and dining hall, etc, 'zither, chess,

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<sup>307</sup> Since June 2010, Nine Dynasty has presented its clients with *kunqu* performances at its *kunqu* stage starring young *kunqu* singers from the Northern *Kunqu* Troupe. For more details of its ticket prices and performing schedule, see [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_61cdcdfb0100iq22.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_61cdcdfb0100iq22.html).

calligraphy, painting, poetry, wine and flowers' (*Qinqishuhua shijiuhua*),<sup>308</sup> this club is a window to traditional Chinese culture.” Cai’s Nine Dynasty aims to provide today’s elite class with an opportunity to experience the life style of ancient Chinese literati, and to help them find the cultural values that belong to Chinese people.<sup>309</sup>

However, maybe the following quotation offers us a clearer idea of what the aim of this club is: “we pursue a modern depiction of the most beautiful cultural elements, arts, and lifestyles from Chinese history, particularly those values once held by the literati since the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern dynasties. We aim to express these values through modern techniques so as to create a channel for modern people to communicate with traditional culture” (Cai Ming cited in Ma Chao 2010: 35).

At Nine Dynasty, there is a small *kunqu* theatre that has been dubbed today’s only private *kunqu* theatre in Beijing.<sup>310</sup> However, what is highlighted about the *kunqu* performances here is not the performance per se or whether it is “authentic” to *kunqu* performing conventions – although the performers are all selected from professional troupes – and the opera performances are only one part of the clients’ activities in the club. What is highlighted is the experience of attending the performances – as the ancient literati enjoyed *kunqu* during their leisure times.

All opera tickets, the prices ranging from 299 yuan to 1800 yuan, include a ticket for dinner. For the seating arrangements, apart from the cheaper usual seats,

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<sup>308</sup> This is a line quoted from an ancient poem, which refers to seven essential elements of a typical literati’s life in ancient China.

<sup>309</sup> See Wang Jing, et al., “Gaoduan huisuo: caifu jingying de xin keting”, *Jingpin gouwu zhinan*, 25 October 2010, at <http://business.sohu.com/20101025/n276423515.shtml>, accessed 16 February 2011.

<sup>310</sup> Cai’s club runs its own blog at [sina.com.cn](http://sina.com.cn), which provides updated information about the activities. See Zhang Lingling, “Cai Ming: ta he ta de Jiuchao Hui”, at [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_61cdcdfb0100heso.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_61cdcdfb0100heso.html), accessed 16 February 2011.

audiences can also choose from “lovers’ sofa”, private boxes, and the super-luxury “royal seats”.<sup>311</sup>

Although Cai Ming declared that everything provided at the club is intended to show the way of life of the literati from the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern dynasties: their free-spiritedness, and their love of desultoriness and nonchalance, we should not take this declaration too literally, because through all their settings and provisions, the club is seeking to nurture an attitude among its clients towards culture and history rather than to develop a specific interest in *kunqu* art only. What one can experience there are not just cultural values typical of the dynasties Cai specified, but also values and traditions from the ensuing dynasties. *Kunqu*, as originated from Ming, is treated as the jewel of the crown – yet there is also a wide range of other cultural elements. The *kunqu* performances in this club seek to unfold many forgotten things, and bring back a lot of memories about the past: the theatre stage was built along similar lines as the three-storey theatre in the Forbidden City which was constructed under the orders of the Empress Dowager Cixi of the Qing dynasty;<sup>312</sup> the singers in Cai Ming’s club formed the first private *kunqu* troupe in Beijing; and on the day of its first performance, they restaged the most extravagant birthday celebration *kunqu* performance in Chinese history: “The ritual of the heavenly gods blessings” (*Tianguan cifu li*), which was originally played for the Empress Dowager Cixi’s 70<sup>th</sup> birthday.”<sup>313</sup>

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<sup>311</sup> For ticket booking details, see <http://www.opppo.com/p2009729135222.html>, accessed 16 February, 2011.

<sup>312</sup> This royal theatre was not constructed for the exclusive performances of *kunqu* in the Qing court, since Cixi was a Peking opera fan. This construction in Cai’s club again proves that the declared return to tradition was in fact a symbolic one.

<sup>313</sup> See Cai Ming, “San xi tongtai chang gujin”, at [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_61cdcdfb0100herp.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_61cdcdfb0100herp.html), accessed 16 February, 2011.

### ***Zhang Rongming's Garden-version of Peony***

Whereas the business elites and white-collar workers seek to experience the lifestyle of the ancient literati through the *kunqu* performances in the seclusion of the ancient granary or the high-class club in Beijing, a “garden-version” *kunqu Peony* was produced in the South. This work was staged in a classical Suzhou garden by Suzhou *Kunqu* Troupe, the same cast of Pai’s *Peony* to be exact, with the investment of a successful Suzhou-born businessman Zhang Rongming. This work marked another step forward in the process of the expansion of different performance venues and sets.

The director of the Suzhou *Kunqu* Troupe, Cai Shaohua is a man of great enterprise. He has been one of the most instrumental persons in Pai’s collaborations as well as being involved in the production of a Sino-Japanese co-production of *The Peony Pavilion*.<sup>314</sup> He never stopped seeking to expand the audience base and exploring different ways of developing the opera. Therefore, when the Suzhou municipal government decided to refurbish the properties of the Suzhou *Kunqu* Training School (*Suzhou Kunju chuanxi suo*) situated in a classical garden, Cai Shaohua developed the idea of putting *kunqu* performance into the natural setting of the garden, thus featuring a perfect combination of the intangible heritage of *kunqu* with the tangible heritage of the Suzhou classical garden. On the other hand, the Beijing Suzhou Chamber of Commerce (*Beijing Suzhou shanghui*) was founded in November 2009, and this organization seeks to make contributions to the development of the homeland of Suzhou. Eventually, a project aiming to establish a *kunqu*-themed high-end social club took shape. Zhang Rongming, CEO of China’s

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<sup>314</sup> This production appeared in 2008 and starred the renowned Japanese *kabuki* actor Tamasaburo Bando, and singers from Suzhou *Kunqu* Troupe.

leading fashion lingerie brand “Aimer” is the sponsor of this project. He decided to fund this *kunqu* programme not only because of his devotion to his home city of Suzhou, but also out of a sense of responsibility to the society, and because he also saw the cultural value of *kunqu* art. For Zhang Rongming, the investment in this project is expected to “create a win-win situation”: *kunqu* and his own fashion brand can mutually benefit from each other’s publicity campaigns. *Kunqu* art will be adopted as one of the most prominent features of his fashion brand when it explores the international market; meanwhile, the successful branding advertisement of Zhang’s fashion products is also expected to lend much expertise to the future marketing of *kunqu* productions.<sup>315</sup>

In fact, Pai Hsien-yung suggested at one point that a world-class *kunqu* theatre should be established in Suzhou, and he proposed that,

...now that *kunqu* has earned its revival, it should take roots in its homeland Suzhou...if *kunqu* is presented with the legacy of Suzhou gardens, I believe there would be a prosperous future for this mode of development. *Kunqu* is the best representation of the city’s culture... ‘Viewing the gardens during the day, and watching *kunqu* in the evening.’ Such refined cultural activities should greatly appeal to the foreign tourists... *Kunqu* can be even better known if it is included into cultural heritage tourist programmes of this kind together with other attractions such as embroidery and silk weaving.<sup>316</sup>

In his proposal, *kunqu* is incorporated into the tourist programme as a cultural attraction thus can be accessed by a wide range and a large number of people, yet Zhang’s project, like its Beijing counterparts, just targeted a much smaller range of audience segments. Zhang Rongming believed that the target audiences of *kunqu* should be those high-end consumers with scholarly refinement.<sup>317</sup> Unlike Cai Ming’s Nine Dynasty, this garden-based social club centres exclusively on *kunqu*. Both the

<sup>315</sup> See Wu Fen, “Zhang Rongming: yi ge Suzhou ren, yichang youyuan meng”, *Beijing wanbao*, 6 June 2010. See also Zhang Lujing 2010: 56.

<sup>316</sup> Dai Jie, “Kunqu huigui, Suzhou du que Kunqu juyuan”, *Guangming ribao*, 3 April 2007.

<sup>317</sup> Zhong Jianchun, “Zhang Rongming yu Kunqu xin yaji”, *Shishang Beijing*, November 2010, pp12-13.

city of Suzhou and the classical gardens have been crucial in the early development of *kunqu*, so by situating this newest production into the natural settings of this city, this production's link with tradition would be established. Besides, the garden provides the perfect stage scenery for some of the scenes in the performances in this project, such as "Interrupted Dream" (*jingmeng*). The garden "has been tailor-made for these scenes" (Zhang Lujing 2010: 55).

On the web page of the Beijing-Suzhou Chamber of Commerce, this Club is introduced as follows,

[it is]the first *kunqu*-themed high-end club based in a typical Suzhou garden. Run through a membership scheme, it takes reservations from various institutions. It is an ideal venue for small and medium scale high-end cultural and business activities. The clients can enjoy the garden scenery, listen to *kunqu* music training, attend introductory talks on the art, and watch performances set in the garden. The club caters for its members with Jiangnan private family-style banquet. It promises to bring to its clients a new experience of the luxurious life style, and to explore the new cultural significance of the time-honoured *kunqu* art.<sup>318</sup>

In recent years, the PRC government has provided a fairly favourable and relaxed environment for various variant modes of *kunqu* development. Once Zhang Rongming's garden-version production hit the market, more similar versions emerged. The Shanghai garden-version of *Peony* produced by Zhang Jun, one of the most promising male *kunqu* singers formerly working for Shanghai *Kunqu* Troupe but now running his own troupe, and featuring the collaboration of a strong team of artists, has accommodated audiences from a wider range of the public – with ticket prices much lower than those in Zhang's Suzhou club.

There is no need here to raise more examples in order to explain the common features of these new works. The use of traditional performing arts as entertainment forms in high-end social clubs and restaurants is not innovative practice if we take

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<sup>318</sup> See "Zhongguo shou ge Kunqu huisuo", at <http://www.bjsuzhoush.org/index.php/Active/view/aid/39>, accessed 16 February 2011.

the entire country's catering business into consideration, yet it is the first time in modern times for *kunqu* to be staged into such luxury venues. What has brought about this practice is the combination of an acute recognition of *kunqu*'s marketability in the specified elite market after its recent revival (partly due to the popularity of Pai's *Peony* and a few other major works as we have discussed) and the recently addressed cultural needs of a rising "elite class" within China. On the other hand, these practices have demonstrated a new trend in the hybridized route of *kunqu* development, which is of great significance for the exploration of *kunqu*'s commercial viability in the future.

As this kind of expensive, high-brow *kunqu* productions become more common in the cultural market, some of the public have started to ask if *kunqu* can really rely on the rich business people's sponsorship. Dong Jian from Nanjing University offered a more justified observation: on the one hand, he asserted that "the high-price, large-scale productions have generated a "pseudo-market", and "false-prosperity"... because there are some nouveau riche people who swarm to the theatre but fall asleep in middle of the shows;" yet on the other hand, he also admitted that "these shows truly brought benefit to those financially weak *kunqu* troupes, so we can not arbitrarily assert that it is a totally negative mode" (Liu Ting 2007).

### **5.5. Pai Hsien-yung's Campus-version *Peony* and Campus-based *Kunqu* Inheritance Project**

As the business of the high-end *kunqu* performing venues discussed in the preceding sections continued to prosper, Pai Hsien-yung selected a different

approach to promote *kunqu* after his two stage productions. This is his college campus based *kunqu* inheritance project (*kunqu chuancheng jihua*) which features *kunqu* lectures and performance training workshops. Peking University was selected as the first site for this project. In this section, I will briefly examine the operation of this scheme, trying to explore the reason why Pai would switch from stage promotion to this “offstage” promotion, and how this would contribute to the overall cause of *kunqu* preservation.

One of the most important aims of Pai Hsien-yung’s *kunqu* promotion in recent years is to bring the opera into schools, especially colleges and universities. His young-lovers’ version of *Peony* has toured to over 30 universities around the world since its debut in 2004.<sup>319</sup> In his speech on the opening ceremony of this *kunqu* inheritance project held in Peking University on 8 December 2009, Pai Hsien-yung explains why offering *kunqu* courses in the college was necessary. He said that *kunqu* courses should be widely offered in the college, so as to help the young students develop interest in *kunqu*, cultural heritage and gain a better understanding of this traditional art. He firmly believed that the *kunqu* classes to be offered by this new promotion scheme would have great cultural significance, because “this would not only reinstall an old tradition, but also gain a new position for *kunqu* research in the academic world.”<sup>320</sup>

There were several reasons why the Institute of Cultural Industry of Peking University was selected as the first collaborator for Pai’s campus-based *kunqu* promotion project. Firstly, Ye Lang, the general director of this Institute, is an ardent

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<sup>319</sup> Pai clearly expressed this point in his introduction to his campus-based project. See “‘Suzhou daxue Pai Hsien-yung kunqu chuancheng jihua – jiyu’” at <http://kunquchuancheng.blog.sohu.com/161610762.html>, accessed 03 March, 2011.

<sup>320</sup> See “Pai Hsien-yung kunqu chuancheng jihua qianshou beida” on Pai’s blog, [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_4cee40a30100gb8w.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4cee40a30100gb8w.html), accessed 03 March, 2011. In this quote, the “tradition” refers to the *kunqu* classes in Peking University by *kunqu* scholar Wu Mei in early twentieth century.



*kunqu* advocate who is known for submitting a report about *kunqu* crisis to the Chinese central government in 2004 which was seen as one of the key factors that contributed to the initiation of China's first five-year plan for *kunqu* preservation.<sup>321</sup> Secondly, Peking University's leading position among Chinese universities and the fact that *kunqu* classes were once offered in this university in the early twentieth century<sup>322</sup> both make it the most ideal site to initiate this project on the mainland. Pai believed that the *kunqu* courses this scheme would offer will "draw the attention of the entire Chinese educational system, and thus help set the trend for traditional cultural inheritance."<sup>323</sup>

The COFCO Coca-Cola Beverages Ltd. Beijing Company<sup>324</sup> offered a five-million yuan sponsorship for Pai's Peking University *kunqu* inheritance project. According to the company source, this investment is an important part for their marketing strategy. Through this collaboration with the cultural, art and educational sectors, and their support for traditional cultural development, the company expects to improve its public image and forge a closer tie with their customers.<sup>325</sup>

This five-year project (2009-2013) aims at promoting *kunqu* through delivering optional courses, organizing public performances, offering *kunqu*-related lectures and exhibitions, and launching a digital *kunqu* information centre.<sup>326</sup> Up till

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<sup>321</sup> Back in 2001, Ye Lang was the deputy director of the Peking opera and *Kunqu* Office of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). Titled "Guanyu jiada *kunqu* qiangjiu he baohu lidu de ji dian jianyi" (Several suggestions for accelerating the inheritance and protection of *kunqu*), this report was co-authored by him and Wang Xuan (1937-2006), the then vice-chairman of CPPCC. For the full text of this report, see Zheng Peikai 2006: 57-61.

<sup>322</sup> Pai spoke highly of Wu Mei's *kunqu* classes at Peking University and considered this to be a tradition that needs to be resumed. See He Liu, "Ye Lang duitan Pai Hsien-yung: baohu *kunqu* jiu xiang baohu qingtongqi", *Zhongguo baodao*, May 2011.

<sup>323</sup> Quoted in "Beida tuiguang *kunqu*, Pai Hsien-yung qidong *kunqu* chuancheng jihua", see <http://culture.people.com.cn/GB/22219/10546406.html>, accessed 03 March 2011.

<sup>324</sup> COFCO Coca-Cola Beverages Ltd. is a joint venture company between China National Cereals, Oils and Foodstuffs Corporation (COFCO) and Coca-Cola Company.

<sup>325</sup> See the news article "Chuancheng *kunqu* yishu, hongyang minus wenhua: beida *kunqu* chuancheng jihua qidong" at <http://www.cofcoco.com/china/zxdtDetail.aspx?DetailId=396>, accessed 03 March 2011.

<sup>326</sup> "Beijing daxue *kunqu* chuancheng jihua" at <http://www.icipku.org/maywalk/KunOpera/>, accessed 03 March

now, this *kunqu* course, titled “The appreciation of *kunqu* classics” (*jingdian kunqu xinshang*), has run a whole academic year (in two terms) in the University as optional course, each block worth two academic credits. The speakers for these courses were from various professional backgrounds: some were dramatists and *kunqu* scholars, some were master *kunqu* actors from professional troupes, and others were artists and leading members from Pai’s *Peony* and *Hairpin* production team. Their talks can be categorized into three broad groups: literary reading of masterpiece *kunqu* scripts, basic *kunqu* aesthetics, and the appreciation of stage performances.<sup>327</sup> All undergraduate students are eligible to apply. Since the lecture hall was always packed, this course was dubbed “the most popular optional course ever in the University’s history”.<sup>328</sup>

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2011.

<sup>327</sup> For the full course schedule for the 2010 round, see Pai’s blog post at [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_4cee40a30100h7jp.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4cee40a30100h7jp.html), accessed 06 March, 2011; for the course list for the 2011 round, see [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_4cee40a30100oe5h.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4cee40a30100oe5h.html), accessed 06 March, 2011.

<sup>328</sup> See Zhou Huaizong “*kunqu* chuancheng jin beida, cheng shishang ‘zui shechi de ke’”, *Beijing chenbao*, 30 March 2011.

Apart from this course, another major achievement of this promotion scheme is the organization of the amateur performance workshops and the production of the



**Figure 7** Pai Hsien-yung's campus-version of *The Peony Pavilion*.

**Top:** Shen Fengying teaching at the Peking University *kunqu* workshop, source: [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_558cd4320100hcag.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_558cd4320100hcag.html);

**Bottom:** a comparison between the campus-version (left) and the young-lovers' version (right). Source: [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_558cd43201017bu3.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_558cd43201017bu3.html), accessed 30 May 2011.

so-called “campus-version” (*xiaoyuan ban*) of *The Peony Pavilion*. In March 2010, about 80 students from different colleges in Beijing attended an audition while was held in Peking University to compete for the places in this *kunqu* workshop. During their one-year training and three-month rehearsals, the leading cast members in Pai's young-lovers' version *Peony* were invited to offer training sessions to these amateur

actors, most of whom had no *kunqu* performance experience before. The world-acclaimed young-lovers' version was used as the model for this campus-version: four scenes were taken from it and taught to the students; from singing to acting, from stage setting to costumes, every single aspect was carefully copied. On 7 April 2011, this campus-version production premiered in the Century Hall of Peking University. Different groups of workshop members were able to show onstage their achievements from the training and rehearsals.<sup>329</sup>

What can we find if we put this latest production into the tradition versus innovation discourse? How is this campus-version justified to be connected with authentic *kunqu* art? It seems that no alterations were made in it, and the young-lovers' version was taken as the authoritative model. Through the training teachers, Yu Jiulin, Shen Fengying and other leading performers from the young-lovers' version, all of whom were students only a few years back, this production established its credibility to be linked with Suzhou *kunqu*. The aesthetic values embodied in the young-lovers' version, which reflect much of Pai and his team's interpretations and choices, were treated as the tradition and norm in this campus-version. The tradition that these amateur performers learned was actually the "invented tradition" which I discussed in Chapter 3. Then, why was Pai's *Peony* was favored over other available versions? The most important reason behind this choice would probably be the already established fame of Pai's *Peony*. Besides, the symbolic meaning of participation (i.e., learning and practicing *kunqu*) seems to be more important than the serious quest for any "authentic" *kunqu* models. The following words by Yang Nannan, one of the amateur singers in this campus-version *Peony*, prove this point:

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<sup>329</sup> Ma Zilei, "Mudan ting yanyuan chuancheng ji", *Zhongguo wenhua bao*, 13 April, 2011, see also Niu Chunmei, "Xiaoyuan ban mudan ting beida shouyan, Pai Hsien-yung: chuantong jingdian buneng gai", *Beijing ribao*, 8 April, 2011.

“...the workshop and the campus-version *Peony* is like a dream for me...the beauty of *kunqu* will be part of my most cherished memories. As for *kunqu* and traditional art, my participation is my way of inheritance with sincerity and respect.”<sup>330</sup>

Another promotion project titled “Suzhou University Pai Hsien-yung *kunqu* inheritance project” was organized in Suzhou University under the sponsorship of Chinese American entrepreneur Zhao Yuanxiu. Within this one-year scheme (autumn 2010-summer 2011), a series of lectures was delivered on the campus-based *kunqu* course; meanwhile, a series of demonstration performances was held. These lectures and performances were divided according to the different role types in *kunqu*.<sup>331</sup>

The third base was established on Taiwan. Chen Yizhen of Taiwan Trend Micro set up the Trend Education Foundation, and made a one-million-dollar donation to the University of Taiwan for the “Pai Hsien-yung literature lecture series”. In the spring of 2011, this series opened a new course “The new aesthetics of *kunqu*” (*kunqu xin meixue*) to introduce the basic knowledge of *kunqu* aesthetics, the production of Pai’s *The Peony Pavilion* and *The Jade Hairpin*. This *kunqu* course turned out to be highly popular. Although the lecture hall could accommodate only 400 places, over 2,000 students signed up for this course. Podcasts of these lectures are available online for those who could not attend the course.<sup>332</sup>

From the young-lovers’ version to the campus-version, Pai’s adaptation of *Peony* has completed its transition from an experiential stage work to an authoritative model for new productions. The aesthetic approach has been firmly established, and

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<sup>330</sup> Yan Nannan cited in “Xiaoyuan ben mudan ting zuowan wumei dengchang” at <http://culture.people.com.cn/GB/22219/14338120.html>, accessed 10 May 2011.

<sup>331</sup> For detailed information about Suzhou University scheme, see its website at <http://www.chinakunqu.org/index.html>, accessed 15 May 2011.

<sup>332</sup> For all podcasts, see [http://www.trend.org/event/kunqu\\_lecture/index.html](http://www.trend.org/event/kunqu_lecture/index.html), accessed 15 May, 2011.

the innovations accepted as “standard”, at least among the young audiences and ardent amateur performers from Pai’s college-based inheritance projects. So what is the significance of this campus-promotion project? I argue that it signifies Pai’s sustained endeavors to reestablish the elite class, herein referring to the college students rather than business elites, as the most reliable mainstay for *kunqu* preservation and development. This project is helping to build a closer relationship between these young people and *kunqu*, in which they are not just audiences, but also practitioners and promoters.

## **5.6. Conclusion**

From Pai’s youth-themed productions that are aimed to construct a young audience base to the social club performances that cater to the wealthy new elites, market-orientation has within a mere ten years grown into one of the most sweeping trends in *kunqu* development, despite a strong outcry from conservationists who bitterly lament the loss of tradition. The commercialization of *kunqu* productions reveals the awakening of an increasing number of Chinese people, particularly accomplished business people as has been demonstrated in this chapter, to establish their own national iconic brand in the cultural field and to maintain national pride. Although Pai and many others asserted that the revival of *kunqu* would depend on the intellectuals, we should not fail to note that there have already been many non-intellectual participants and promoters who are actively involved in the process with their financial support, business ambitions, or artistic creativity.

In all cases discussed here, *kunqu* is not particularly presented as a carrier of state ideological and morality teachings,<sup>333</sup> but rather as a commercial commodity that starts to help to construct and consolidate the cultural identity of business elites who are seeking to mark their aesthetic tastes through traditional culture and arts. *Kunqu*'s recent prosperity amidst this particular elite discourse is mainly guaranteed by the uninterrupted advancement of the socialist market economy, and promoted by another round of culture sector reform. In these examples, the intentions of production and consumption have been varied, and not all of those involved have directly related their practice to the preservation of *kunqu* or the revival of Chinese culture. The actions have, nevertheless, invariably contributed to the promotion of *kunqu*. Moreover, the coming into being of these new productions has exhibited a tendency towards more variations that feature both conventional *kunqu* values and the latest aesthetics.

The most noticeable common traits in all these new approaches can be seen from the following three aspects: firstly, they all applied a sort of "recipe for success" to their production, i.e. involving a team of accomplished artists and celebrities from various fields, ranging from renowned fashion designers to acclaimed choreographers, from great musicians to established directors; secondly, they have drawn inspiration from traditional culture, and the typical "Chinese" elements are well integrated with the performance itself and are presented as a very strong selling point; and thirdly, they all have taken the audiences' needs into consideration and used this as an important factor to guide their designs for new productions. We have also seen all three factors embodied in Pai's *kunqu* productions.

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<sup>333</sup> This function is more stressed in the state-sponsored newly-edited *kunqu* productions. Examples included those recent productions recognized as "excellent plays" in state awards, and these works deserve separate studies.

This is why his works have been widely credited with winning renewed attention from the general public and with the introduction of this new proliferation of varied productions.

Moreover, all the productions under discussion in this chapter have treated *kunqu* performing conventions with respect and the young singers have been trained in a traditional and professional manner before they take the stage. The success of these productions, both the youth-themed large-scale productions, and the high-end excerpted-scene works, is not achieved at the price of eroding basic performing conventions. On the contrary, the pursuit of “authenticity” (of whatever standard they claim to be) is one of the most highlighted elements and helps win over the targeted audiences.

While the future of *kunqu* is still uncertain, it is important to note that at least for the time being, the *kunqu* market has been expanded to a much greater extent than before, finding a niche audience among both the general public and the elite class. The dynamics exhibited in this process of expansion has been the key factor in altering the overall landscape of *kunqu* art in China. Equally important is the fact that the popularity of different *kunqu* productions among different sectors of the general population has revealed the transformation of cultural consumption among the Chinese as the country’s social context is constantly reshaped by its market economy development and globalization.



## CONCLUSION

By adopting Pai Hsien-yung's *kunqu* stage adaptation of *The Peony Pavilion* as a case study, this dissertation has examined one of the most visible attempts during the past ten years to preserve Chinese *kunqu*. I contextualized this work into the history of *kunqu*, and analyzed the particular strategies of production, distribution and the reception of this play, and its impact on more recent *kunqu* productions. This stage work can serve as a prime example to demonstrate the impact of the socio-cultural conditions on today's *kunqu* development and the *kunqu* practitioners' response to such conditions. For this detailed study, several conclusions can be drawn from the following three levels.

On the first level, *kunqu* preservation took a new direction under the particular context shaped in the last decade. This context was different from those in previous historical periods mainly because of *kunqu*'s newly acquired special status as a part of the "cultural heritage of humanity" underpinned by UNESCO's 2001 designation. This recognition made the preservation of *kunqu* traditional conventions a common cause for both the government and the general public. The protection and safeguarding of *kunqu* as cultural heritage became a task of high priority. Following the UNESCO Convention for Safeguarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage 2003, Chinese central government issued a directive to guide the protection of Chinese intangible cultural heritage. The general principle of this directive stipulates that "the primary task is to protect [the intangible cultural heritage], and the rescue [of it]

comes first; to exploit it with a rational plan, and then inherit and develop it.”<sup>334</sup> Although this task of protection and safeguarding is clearly articulated, what is supposed to be protected and how to protect it is not as clearly set out.

This forms the background of Pai’s participation in *kunqu* production in this new century. I have shown in Chapter 3 that his choice of the youth-theme, preserving singing and acting conventions while innovating in other aspects of the stage performance is an active response to this particular context. Through this stage work, Pai addressed both issues of performing conventions protection and new audience construction. The *kunqu* tradition that was preserved, the elements in this stage work that embody its continuity with the *kunqu* past, according to Pai’s choice, are the basic performing techniques mainly represented by singing and acting. Pai established this continuity and justified his production as a “traditional” *kunqu* work by hiring a group of world-renowned master performers who are the bearers of the most celebrated *kunqu* artistic lineage to teach and train the young cast of this production. In order to lend more authority to this training system, Pai even re-enacted the long-abandoned practice of the formal bond establishment ceremony between master and student. Yet Pai did not consider the protection of traditions as the ultimate goal of *kunqu* preservation. His vision is to make this cultural heritage known to and celebrated by a newly constructed audience base. His strategy to achieve this goal is to adopt modern technologies to improve stage sets and props, costuming, dancing and music orchestration. However, despite all these innovations,

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<sup>334</sup> Quoted from “Guanyu jiaqiang woguo feiwuzhi wenhua yichan bao hu gongzuo de yijian” issued by the General Office of the State Council of PRC in March 2005, see Yu Haiguang 2005: 190.

Pai firmly refused to call this work a new creation; instead he claimed it to be an apt homage to *kunqu* tradition.<sup>335</sup>

Pai's stage work has demonstrated some distinctive features that set it apart from many other productions. Aesthetically, he created a combination of the stylized performing conventions with innovated stage set and costuming, among other features. Such interactive fusion was designed to demonstrate the *kunqu* "tradition" that Pai and his supporters consider to be of vital importance for *kunqu* preservation. As has been argued in Chapter 3, this tradition is actually an "invented tradition" that represents their personal interpretation of *kunqu* aesthetics. Culturally speaking, Pai's work has been able to reflect the aspirations and hopes of many people – including artists, sponsors, volunteers and most importantly, the audiences – for the revival of *kunqu* and traditional Chinese culture and arts.

On the second level, the wide distribution of Pai's *Peony* and its considerable influence on several other major *kunqu* productions in recent years has shed some light on a few new trends in cultural consumption. Concerning audience construction, Pai's work seems to have accomplished a "mission impossible" – young people are customarily considered to be the least likely section of the public to become members of the audience for traditional operas in today's performing context, and there are potential barriers for attendance by overseas audiences, especially the classical language involved in *kunqu* performances, yet Pai's *Peony* became a record-setting performance.

As was shown, it would be impossible to say that Pai's work is a bona fide, authentically traditional *kunqu* stage production because there has not been any

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<sup>335</sup> On this point Pai has never changed his position. One of the latest reiteration was made on an interview conducted by China's internet portal sohu.com, see "Pai Hsien-yung fāngtān" at <http://cul.sohu.com/s2011/baixianyong/>, accessed 06 May 2011.

single stage production or any single school of *kunqu* performing practice already established as “authentic”, and for this, Pai has openly expressed his agreement.<sup>336</sup> Therefore, it is important to seek a more truthful understanding of why many still firmly believe that Pai’s work has grasped the essence of traditional *kunqu* aesthetics. Superficially, they believe that this work has faithfully followed some of the most fundamental conventions of *kunqu* performance. Yet more profoundly, the impossibility of being (tangibly) authentic has been made up of by a sort of “intangible” or alternative authenticity, that is the experience of a life style of the scholarly, educated people of the past through the attendance at *kunqu* performances.

For the analysis in Chapter 4, we see that on the one hand, the great interest taken by young audiences within the mainland of China can be better understood if we take into consideration a new quest for traditional cultural revival, and the patriotism embodied in the preservation of this internationally recognized cultural heritage. On the other hand, the enthusiasm of members of the Chinese diasporic communities towards Pai’s work resulted from their pursuit of a Chinese identity and “Chineseness,” which have proved to be very strong sentiments towards the “centre”, or the Chinese motherland. For these overseas audiences, what really matters is the symbolic meaning of opera performances of this kind rather than their actual authenticity. In other words, this work has exactly addressed the psychological needs of these audiences, compared to which the authenticity of the performance became less important. The wide distribution of Pai’s *Peony* has demonstrated the viability of *kunqu* in the domestic and international markets despite the threat posed by the rampant popular culture and entertainment. Because of this viability and *kunqu*’s

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<sup>336</sup> For instance, see my interview with Pai in Appendix 5.

growing presence in the world, this work was adopted by the Chinese government for its cultural promotion in the international arena.

I argued in Chapter 5 that apart from its wide distribution and great popularity among its audiences, Pai's work also exerted a big influence on *kunqu* production, particularly commercial productions, in recent years. The greatest inspiration the producers under discussion have drawn from Pai's *Peony* is the pursuit of new audiences – not the general public but a certain segment of the public; maintaining a creative balance between traditional conventions and contemporary innovation, and the recruitment of private sponsorship. By following this recipe for success, all these productions turned out to be highly successful in today's entertainment market. These works have created a new landscape in the *kunqu* circle.

On the third level, I contextualized the case of Pai's stage production into the history of *kunqu*, and argued that some correlations can be found between this case and some earlier occurrences. In this sense, the trajectory of *kunqu* development has not followed a linear path of evolution. The repetition of history is mainly addressed in the following aspects of Pai's production: 1) the involvement of social forces outside the *kunqu* circle during a time of crisis, such as private sponsorship, volunteers; 2) market-oriented production and publicity strategies; and 3) the focus on the elite class audiences.

Among all these similarities, the cultivation of an elite audience base is probably the most prominent. I tend to classify the audiences of Pai's *Peony* as 'elite' because during its tour of China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and the U.S., college students accounted for the overwhelming majority of the audiences, whereas its European and Singaporean performances were attended by artistically sensitive city dwellers. The

productions examined in Chapter 5, particularly Tian Qinxin's *Peach Blossom Fan*, and the three different versions of *The Peony Pavilion* staged respectively in the Ming royal granary, the Chinese high-end theme club and the Suzhou private garden, all set their clear goal of targeting elite audiences, especially members of the business elite who have an interest in traditional culture and art.

*Kunqu* is known to be the opera form once closely associated with the elite: from the Ming dynasty literati and wealthy merchant private troupe owners to the Qing court patrons, and from the Republican era scholar promoters (such as Wu Mei and Yu Pingbo) to the post-1949 Taiwan *kunqu* promoters (such as Xu Yanzhi and Zheng Yinbai), all were from the elite classes. Both in its prominence and at times of crisis, *kunqu* has attracted the elite class and benefited from their loyalty and enthusiasm. Because the unique music, literary and artistic values of *kunqu* have an enduring power to attract the elite class and in return the elite class will always feel a responsibility to promote and preserve the genre for its high cultural and artistic connotations, the association between these participants-cum-advocates. As a result *kunqu* has stood the test of time in the past centuries. Today, this association, together with its depiction of the ancient elitists' life style of ease and comfort has become one of the biggest selling points of these new *kunqu* productions.

Another point worth mentioning is the dispute between Pai and other *kunqu* producers about whether *kunqu* should enter into free-market competition. In Pai's eyes, *kunqu* should not be exploited as a profit-making tool; "refined art of such kind is not supposed to compete in the commercial market."<sup>337</sup> He suggests that the best solution for *kunqu* preservation would be the creation of a cultural or art foundation

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<sup>337</sup> See Li Si "Mudan ting bu qiu touzi huibao", at [http://www.ihchina.cn/inc/detail.jsp?info\\_id=3025](http://www.ihchina.cn/inc/detail.jsp?info_id=3025), accessed 30 May 2011.

for sponsorship. On the other hand, some of the new and emerging productions as discussed in Chapter 5 have treated this genre as a lucrative entertainment investment. This puts to the fore a resurgent question of what the social role of *kunqu* should be in this new century. Is its newly-acquired status of being cultural heritage compatible with its being an entertainment form and a cultural commodity?

In May 2011 China celebrated the tenth anniversary of the UNESCO's designation of Chinese *kunqu* as a part of the world's intangible cultural heritage. One year ago, the Chinese government initiated the second five-year plan (2010-2014) for *kunqu* preservation.<sup>338</sup> One of the priorities is an annual *kunqu* performance week to be held in major *kunqu* base cities: Beijing, Shanghai, Suzhou, Nanjing and Hangzhou. Compared to the working agenda of the first five-year plan (2005-2009), it is obvious that the emphasis has now shifted onto public performances to demonstrate the achievements of young actor training and the inheritance of traditional performing skills.<sup>339</sup> In contrast to this change of working agenda among *kunqu* practitioners, the academic debate about *kunqu* preservation is still ongoing among dramatists and scholars. Many of these arguments still revolve around the polarities of traditional conventions versus contemporary innovations. Whilst one camp holds the view that *kunqu* needs no more alteration and change, and the best way of preserving it is to treat it as a museum piece without any further alteration of its aesthetic values, the other camp insists that as an evolving genre, *kunqu* still needs to actively respond to the ever-changing social and historical contexts in order to maintain its vitality. There are also a few people who hold a middle-ground position,

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<sup>338</sup> See "Kunqu chenggong shen'yi shinian, wenhua baohu re shengwen" at [http://www.sh.xinhuanet.com/2011-05/12/content\\_22744622.htm](http://www.sh.xinhuanet.com/2011-05/12/content_22744622.htm), accessed 05 June 2011.

<sup>339</sup> The first five-year plan has focused on the restoration and adaptation of traditional plays, archival chronicling, especially the recording of old masters' signature performances. For the full text of the working program of this plan, see "Guojia kunqu yishu qiangjiu, baohu, he fuchi gongcheng shishi fang'an" at Chinese Ministry of Culture website. See [http://www.ccnt.gov.cn/sjzz/yss/wjj/200907/t20090727\\_72201.html](http://www.ccnt.gov.cn/sjzz/yss/wjj/200907/t20090727_72201.html), accessed 05 June 2011.

suggesting that there can be two separate routes for the future development of *kunqu*: one is to treat it as fossilized piece, and the other is to develop “hybridized” *kunqu* productions with whatever alterations and changes are needed.

On a final note, it should be pointed out that although the topic of this study is *kunqu* preservation in today’s globalized world of today, the study has focused on just one new mode of production and distribution that depends on sponsorship and directorship from outside the *kunqu* circle. Nevertheless, this does not indicate that the mode under my discussion is the single most important or most promising mode in modern times. The more conventional modes of production practised by artists inside the *kunqu* circle or amateur *kunqu* performers and aficionados are both worth separate studies. Research in these different perspectives will shed fresh light on our understanding of other key contributors for *kunqu* development and promotion, and thus provide a fuller picture of the overall state of *kunqu* preservation in the modern socio-cultural context.

Finally, by examining the preservation of *kunqu* in recent years through the case of Pai’s stage production, we see that today’s *kunqu* is fulfilling multiple roles in different discourses. Now respected as cultural heritage, it links the past with the present; it serves as a national cultural identity; it is capable of arousing a sense of national pride and thus can function as an effective tool for China’s cultural promotion in the international community; for some Chinese elites, *kunqu* does not merely provide an entertainment but more importantly embodies a long-lost artistically superior lifestyle that they aspire to lead. Because of all these divergent roles, the preservation of this operatic genre becomes an increasingly complex and challenging task. It is still unclear what the future holds for *kunqu* development



despite the endeavours from all social strata in the last ten years or so. Again, we can gain some insight into the uncertainty of the future trends in *kunqu* preservation from Pai's reflection after his close involvement in *kunqu* promotion of the last few years. The entrepreneurial funding for the world tour of Pai's *Peony* ended in 2009. Pai admitted that now nothing is within his personal control, and large-scale performance seems no longer possible. He wanted to know, "who is going to take over such a beautiful peony?"<sup>340</sup> Obviously, the "peony" in Pai's question does not just refer to the masterpiece *Peony* performance; rather it refers to *kunqu* art. However, the overall situation is not so very gloomy because a few other "peonies" are still in blossom. It is this assortment of blooming peonies in transplantation that have painted one of the most colourful parts of the overall *kunqu* scene of today.

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<sup>340</sup> See Shi Yan, "Zheme hao yiduo mudan, shui jie guoqu?", *Nanfang zhoumo*, 23 March 2010, at <http://www.infzm.com/content/43051>, accessed 05 June 2011.

## APPENDIX ONE List of scenes in the young-lovers' version of

### *The Peony Pavilion*

<i>The young-lovers' version Peony</i>		<i>In the original play script</i>	
<b>Book I</b>	<b>The Dream of Love (<i>mengzhong qing</i> 梦中情)</b>		
Scene 1	Enlightening the Daughter ( <i>xunnü</i> 训女)	Scene 3	Admonishing the Daughter
Scene 2	The Classroom ( <i>guishu</i> 闺塾)	Scene 7	The Schoolroom
Scene 3	Interrupted Dream ( <i>jingmeng</i> 惊梦)	Scene 10	The Interrupted Dream
Scene 4	Declaration of Ambitions ( <i>yanhuai</i> 言怀)	Scene 2	Declaring Ambition
Scene 5	Search for the Dream ( <i>xunmeng</i> 寻梦)	Scene 12	Pursuing the Dream
Scene 6	The Traitor ( <i>ludie</i> 虏谍)	Scene 15	A Spy for the Tartars
Scene 7	Painting a Portrait ( <i>xiezhen</i> 写真)	Scene 14	The Portrait
Scene 8	The Taoist Nun ( <i>daoqi</i> 道颀)	Scene 17	Sorceress of the Tao
Scene 9	The Soul Departs ( <i>lihun</i> 离魂)	Scene 20	Keening ( <i>naoshang</i> 闹殇)
<b>Book II</b>	<b>Romance and Resurrection (<i>rengui qing</i> 人鬼情)</b>		
Scene 1	Hell ( <i>mingpan</i> 冥判)	Scene 23	Infernal Judgment
Scene 2	On the Road ( <i>lūji</i> 旅寄)	Scene 22	Traveller's Rest
Scene 3	Reminiscing about the Daughter ( <i>yinü</i> 忆女)	Scene 25	Maternal Remembrance
Scene 4	The Portrait Recovered ( <i>shihua</i> 拾画)	Scene 24	The Portrait Recovered
Scene 5	The Wandering Soul ( <i>hunyou</i> 魂游)	Scene 27	Spirit Roaming
Scene 6	Consorting with a Ghost ( <i>yougou</i> 幽媾)	Scene 28	Union in the Shades
Scene 7	Impending Danger over Huaiyang	Scene 38	The Scourge of the

	( <i>huaijing</i> 淮警)		Huai
Scene 8	Love Vows ( <i>mingshi</i> 冥誓)	Scene 32	Spectral Vows
Scene 9	Resurrection ( <i>huisheng</i> 回生)	Scene 35	Resurrection
<b>Book III Reunion and Triumph</b> ( <i>renjian qing</i> 人间情)			
Scene 1	Wedding ( <i>hunzou</i> 婚走)	Scene 36	Elopement
Scene 2	Armies on the Move ( <i>yizhen</i> 移镇)	Scene 42	Troop Transfer
Scene 3	Arrival in Hangzhou ( <i>ruhang</i> 如杭)	Scene 39	Hangzhou
Scene 4	Frustrating the Enemy ( <i>zhekou</i> 折寇)	Scene 46	The Rebels Countered
Scene 5	Reunion with Mother ( <i>yumu</i> 遇母)	Scene 48	Mother and Daughter Reunited
Scene 6	Stranded at Huai'an ( <i>huaibo</i> 淮泊)	Scene 49	Moored before Huai'an
Scene 7	Searching for the Top Candidate ( <i>suoyuan</i> 索元)	Scene 52	The Search for the Candidate
Scene 8	Torture ( <i>yingkao</i> 硬拷)	Scene 53	Torture
Scene 9	The Emperor's Verdict ( <i>yuanjia</i> 圆驾)	Scene 55	The Emperor's Verdict

**Note:** The English titles of the 27 scenes in Pai's *Peony* shown in this table are cited from Sadler's Wells playbill, June 2008; Chinese titles of these scenes are from Pai 2006. Titles of the scenes from the original script are cited from Birch 1980.

## APPENDIX TWO List of all 55 scenes in Tang Xianzu's original

### script of *The Peony Pavilion* (mudan ting)

	<i>Introduction (tiji 题记)</i>
Scene 1	Legend ( <i>biaomu</i> 标目)
Scene 2	Declaring Ambition ( <i>yanhua</i> 言怀)
Scene 3	Admonishing the Daughter ( <i>xunnü</i> 训女)
Scene 4	Pedant's Lament ( <i>futan</i> 腐叹)
Scene 5	Engaging the Tutor ( <i>yanshi</i> 延师)
Scene 6	Despairing Hopes ( <i>changtiao</i> 怅眺)
Scene 7	The Schoolroom ( <i>guishu</i> 闺塾)
Scene 8	Speed the Plough ( <i>quannong</i> 劝农)
Scene 9	Sweeping the Garden ( <i>suyuan</i> 肃苑)
Scene 10	The Interrupted Dream ( <i>jingmeng</i> 惊梦)
Scene 11	Well-meant Warning ( <i>cijie</i> 慈戒)
Scene 12	Pursuing the Dream ( <i>xunmeng</i> 寻梦)
Scene 13	In Search of Patronage ( <i>jueye</i> 诀谒)
Scene 14	The Portrait ( <i>xiezhen</i> 写真)
Scene 15	A Spy for the Tartars ( <i>ludie</i> 虏谍)
Scene 16	The Invalid ( <i>jiebing</i> 诘病)
Scene 17	Sorceress of the Tao ( <i>daoxi</i> 道觐)
Scene 18	Diagnosis ( <i>zhensui</i> 诊祟)
Scene 19	The Brigadess ( <i>pinzei</i> 牝贼)
Scene 20	Keening ( <i>naoshang</i> 闹殇)
Scene 21	The Interview ( <i>yeyu</i> 谒遇)
Scene 22	Traveller's Rest ( <i>lüji</i> 旅寄)
Scene 23	Infernal Judgment ( <i>mingpan</i> 冥判)
Scene 24	The Portrait Recovered ( <i>shihua</i> 拾画)
Scene 25	Maternal Remembrance ( <i>yinü</i> 忆女)
Scene 26	The Portrait Examined ( <i>wanzhen</i> 玩真)
Scene 27	Spirit Roaming ( <i>hunyou</i> 魂游)
Scene 28	Union in the Shades ( <i>yougou</i> 幽媾)
Scene 29	Gossip ( <i>pangyi</i> 旁疑)
Scene 30	Disrupted Joy ( <i>huanrao</i> 欢扰)
Scene 31	Defensive Works ( <i>shanbei</i> 缮备)
Scene 32	Spectral Vows ( <i>mingshi</i> 冥誓)
Scene 33	Confidential Plans ( <i>miyi</i> 秘议)
Scene 34	Consultation ( <i>xiongyao</i> 诤药)

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Scene 35	Resurrection ( <i>huisheng</i> 回生)
Scene 36	Elopement ( <i>hunzou</i> 婚走)
Scene 37	The Alarm ( <i>haibian</i> 骇变)
Scene 38	The Scourge of the Huai ( <i>huaijing</i> 淮警)
Scene 39	Hangzhou ( <i>ruhang</i> 如杭)
Scene 40	In Search of the Master ( <i>puzhen</i> 仆侦)
Scene 41	Delayed Examination ( <i>danshi</i> 耽试)
Scene 42	Troop Transfer ( <i>yizhen</i> 移镇)
Scene 43	The Siege of Huai'an ( <i>yuhuai</i> 御淮)
Scene 44	Concern for the Besieged ( <i>jinan</i> 急难)
Scene 45	A Spy for the Rebels ( <i>koujian</i> 寇间)
Scene 46	The Rebels Countered ( <i>zhekou</i> 折寇)
Scene 47	Raising the Siege ( <i>weishi</i> 围释)
Scene 48	Mother and Daughter Reunited ( <i>yumu</i> 遇母)
Scene 49	Moored before Huai'an ( <i>huaibo</i> 淮泊)
Scene 50	Uproar at the Banquet ( <i>naoyan</i> 闹宴)
Scene 51	The Lists Proclaimed ( <i>bangxia</i> 榜下)
Scene 52	The Search for the Candidate ( <i>suoyuan</i> 索元)
Scene 53	Interrogation under the Rod ( <i>yingkao</i> 硬拷)
Scene 54	Glad News ( <i>wenxi</i> 闻喜)
Scene 55	Reunion at Court ( <i>yuanjia</i> 圆驾)

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**Note:** English titles of these scenes are from Birch 1980; Chinese titles are from Tang Xianzu 1965.

### APPENDIX THREE The performance list of Pai Hsien-yung's

#### young lovers' version of *The Peony Pavilion* (2004-2009)

<i>Date</i>	<i>Venue</i>	<i>Number of instalments</i>
<b>2004</b>		
25 April – 02 May	National Theatre, Taipei 台北国家戏剧院	6
05 May	Hsinchu Performance Hall 新竹演艺厅	1
21 – 23 May	Sha Tin Town Hall, Hong Kong 香港沙田大会堂	3
11 – 13 June	Suzhou University 苏州大学	3
02 – 04 July	Suzhou Kaiming Grand Theatre 苏州开明戏院 (世界遗产大会)	3
14 – 15 September	Dongpo Theatre, Hangzhou 杭州东坡剧院 (第七届中国艺术节)	3
17 – 18 September	Zhejiang University 浙江大学	3
21 – 23 October	Century Theatre, Beijing 北京世纪剧院 (第七届北京国际音乐节)	3
21 – 23 November	Shanghai Grand Theatre 上海大剧院	3
<b>2005</b>		
07 – 09 March	Macau Cultural Centre 澳门文化中心	3
08 – 10 April	Peking University Hall 北京大学百年纪念讲堂	3
13 – 15 April	Beijing Normal University 北京师范大学	3
19 – 21 April	Nankai University, Tianjin 天津南开大学	3
20 – 22 May	Great Hall of the People, Nanjing 南京人民大会堂 (南京大学 103 周年校庆)	3
27 – 29 May	Shanghai Art Theatre 上海艺海剧院 (复旦大学百年庆)	3
03 – 05 June	Tongji University, Shanghai 上海同济大学	3
06 July	The Great Hall of Suzhou 苏州人民大会堂	1
06 – 08 November	Foshan Theatre, Guangdong 佛山大剧院 (第七亚洲艺术节)	3
15 – 17 December	National Theatre, Taipei 台北国家戏剧院	3
18 December	National Theatre, Taipei	1

	台北国家戏剧院	
20 December	National Cheng Kung University, Tainan 台南成功大学	1
22 December	National Chiao Tung Univeristy, Hsin Chu 新竹交通大学	1
24 December	Chungli Art Museum 中坜艺术馆	1
<b>2006</b>		
06 – 08 January	Shenzhen Auditorium 深圳会堂	3
18 – 20 April	Peking University 北京大学	3
22 – 24 April	Communication University of China 中国传媒大学（北大百年纪念讲堂）	3
28 – 30 April	Nankai University, Tianjin 天津南开大学	3
05 – 07 June	Hong Kong Cultural Centre 香港文化中心	3
15 – 17 September	Zellerbach Hall, University of California, Berkeley 加州大学伯克利分校	3
22 – 24 September	Irvine Barclay Theatre 加州大学尔湾分校	3
29 September – 01 October	Royce Hall, University of California, Los Angeles 加州大学洛杉矶分校	3
06 – 08 October	Lobero Theatre, Santa Barbara 加州大学圣芭芭拉分校	3
24 – 26 November	Guangxi Normal University 广西师范大学	3
01 – 03 December	The K. K. Leung Hall, Sun Yat-sen University 广州中山大学梁鍊琚堂	3
08 – 10 December	Beijing Normal Univeristy, Zhuhai (The Great Hall of Zhuhai) 北京师范大学珠海校区（珠海大会堂）	3
15 – 17 December	Xiamen University (The Jiannan Hall) 厦门大学（建南大会堂）	3
<b>2007</b>		
11 – 13 May	Beijing Exhibition Theatre 北京展览馆剧场	3
21 June	Nanjiang Culture and Art Centre 南京文化艺术中心	1
14 – 16 September	Xi'an Jiaotong University 西安交通大学	3
21 – 23 September	Sichuan University 四川大学	3
08 – 10 October	The National Centre for the Performing Arts, Beijing 北京国家大剧院	3
20 – 21 November	Lanzhou Jiaotong University 兰州交通大学	2
22 – 23 November	Lanzhou University 兰州大学	2
26 – 27 November	Chang'an University, Xi'an	2

	西安长安大学	
28 – 29 November	Shaanxi Normal University 陕西师范大学	2
10 – 11 December	Suzhou Science and Cultural Arts Centre 苏州科技文化艺术中心	3
16 – 17 December	Fujian Normal University 福建师范大学	2
18 – 19 December	Fuzhou University 福州大学	2
<b>2008</b>		
14 – 16 February	Beijing Exhibition Theatre 北京展览馆剧场（第三届北展歌舞音乐节）	3
03 – 05 April	Wuhan University 武汉大学	3
09 – 11 April	University of Science and Technology of China 合肥中国科技大学	3
03 – 08 June	Sadler's Wells, London 英国伦敦萨德勒斯·韦尔斯剧院	6
12 – 14 June	Megaron Theatre, Athens （雅典艺术节）	3
05 – 07 August	Mei Lanfang Theatre 梅兰芳大剧院（奥运会重大演出活动参演剧目）	3
09 – 10 August	Mei Lanfang Theatre 梅兰芳大剧院（奥运会重大演出活动参演剧目）	3
09 – 10 September	Longshan Theatre, Yuyao, Zhejiang 浙江余姚龙山剧院（慰问教师节演出）	2
27 – 29 September	Zhengzhou 郑州（第十届亚洲艺术节）	3
02 October	Suzhou Science and Cultural Arts Centre 苏州科技文化艺术中心（一周年庆）	1
19 – 20 October	Daxinggong Hall, Nanjing 南京大行宫会堂（第三十一届世界戏剧节）	2
11 November	Suzhou Science and Cultural Arts Centre 苏州科技文化艺术中心（精品工程演出）	1
25 – 27 December	Tang Xianzu Theatre, Fuzhou, Jiangxi 江西抚州汤显祖大剧院（落成演出）	3
<b>2009</b>		
08 – 10 May	Esplanade: Theatre on the Bay, Singapore 新加坡滨海艺术中心剧院	3
03 – 05 July	The National Centre for the Performing Arts, Beijing 北京国家大剧院	3
15 August	Wuxi People's Conference Hall 无锡人民大会堂	1
11 – 13 September	Hongya Cave Bayu Theatre, Chongqing 重庆洪崖洞巴渝剧院	3
24 – 26 September	Huanghuagang Theatre, Guangzhou 广州黄花岗剧院	3
01 – 03 October	Shanghai Oriental Art Centre 上海东方艺术中心	3
18 – 20 December	Peking University Hall 北京大学百年纪念讲堂	3



## APPENDIX FOUR List of *kunqu* role-types

The following list shows the major role-types in modern Chinese *kunqu*, and their respective sub-categories:

### ***sheng* 生 – male**

*laosheng* 老生 – old male, loyal and upright character;

*da guansheng* 大官生 – senior male with advanced social status, usually emperor and high-ranking official;

*xiao guansheng* 小官生 – junior male with freshly earned social status, or young civil servant;

*jinsheng* 巾生 – males with silk headdress, scholarly young men, male protagonist in love stories;

*qiongsheng* 穷生 – deprived and disheartened male;

*zhiweisheng* 雉尾生 – young male with plume-decorated headdress, usually young military officer;

*wusheng* 武生 – middle-aged male with great martial skills;

### ***dan* 旦 – female**

*laodan* 老旦 – old female

*zhengdan* 正旦 – middle-aged or married young female, deprived yet courageous to maintain her virtue;

*guimendan* 闺门旦 – also called *wudan* 五旦, virtuous young lady from a well-off family and female protagonist in love stories;

*cishadan* 刺杀旦 – shrewd and valiant female that revenges herself for a harm or wrong;

*liudan* 六旦 – also called *tiedan* 贴旦, clever, brave and vivacious young girl with very low social status;

*daomadan* 刀马旦 – female military officer with exceptional martial skills, usually using long-shaft weapons;

*wudan* 武旦 – female warrior with short-shaft weapons;

***jing* 净 – painted-face**

*damian* 大面 – also called *da hualian* 大花脸, mostly bold, loyal, courageous and upright character;

*heimian* 黑面 – black painted-face, rough yet bold and forthright general or hero;

*baimian* 白面 – white painted-face, mostly villain in power such as a traitor minister;

*lata baimian* 邋遢白面 – unkempt white painted-face, vulgar character with low social status;

***chou* 丑 – clown**

*ermian* 二面 – also called *fuchou* 副丑, villain with considerable social status;

*xiaochou* 小丑 – also called *sanmian* 三面 or *xiaomian* 小面, mostly comic character from the lowest social class.

**Note:** this list is mainly based on *Zhongguo de kunqu yishu bianxiezu* 2005: 92-98. However, different scholars have provided slightly different categorization of *kunqu* role-types. See, for example, Zhou Qin 2004: 126-131; Zhu Hengfu 2003: 98-100; Liu Zhen & Xie Yongjun 2005: 223-230.

## APPENDIX FIVE Transcription of Interview with Pai Hsien-yung

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**Time:** 17:00-18:00, 7 June 2008

**Venue:** Café at Sadler's Wells Theatre, London

**Interviewer:** Wei Zhou (henceforth as Wei)

**Interviewee:** Pai Hsien-yung (henceforth as Pai)

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**Wei:** My project is about *kunqu* preservation and I am using this young-lovers' version of *The Peony Pavilion* as a case study.

Pai: Together with the hundredth show anniversary DVD we produced an 80-minute chronicle disc that introduces the entire process of our production of this play and our performance tour so far. There's been a lot of information published about our young-lovers' version of this play. You should firstly try to gather all these sources. The eleventh book about our play has now been published - among these books, there's a stage photo collection. Some of these books were published in Taiwan, and some on the (Chinese) mainland....you may even find that a few of them are already out of print, but if you search on the internet, there have been a great number of comments and reviews, including newspaper articles...at the moment there are many critics in the U.K. newspapers writing about our performances. I have brought a collection of press reviews from our U.S. west tour. I can give it to you. With all these books and papers to hand, you should get a complete picture of this production. Tonight we are presenting the 141st show and there will be three performances in Greece, which brings the total up to 144. You might wish to list all the places we've toured, so as to show that this production has been distributed to a wide range of global audiences. For example, on the mainland, we've been to Xi'an and Lanzhou in the west; Beijing and Tianjin in the north; then Sichuan, Wuhan, Hefei, Nanjing, Shanghai, Hangzhou, Suzhou; quite a few places in Guangdong, such as Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Foshan; then Xiamen, Guilin; several cities in Taiwan, then Hong Kong and Macao. Outside China, we've been to the U.S., Britain, and we're going to Greece. This tour has contributed considerably to the distribution of *kunqu* art, and to the promotion of Chinese cultural heritage. Of course you'll find some other *kunqu* productions being staged, but our production has had the biggest influence. You can discuss all these other productions in your case study.

**Wei:** What changes have actually taken place in *kunqu*'s status over the last ten years or so, particularly since the 2001 UNESCO designation of *kunqu* as part of the "oral and intangible cultural heritage of humanity"?

Pai: Firstly let's make a comparison. Before 2001, *kunqu* was stuck in a deep crisis, and the number of audiences dropped to a very low level. In the ten years before 2001, *kunqu* development all depended on the support of Taiwan and Hong Kong, whereas the mainland *kunqu* market was very weak. Especially in Taiwan, almost every year they would invite professional troupes from the mainland to perform there. All those *kunqu* troupes have toured in Taiwan. Taiwan had already built up a stable *kunqu* audience base and it was Taiwan and Hong Kong that functioned as the *kunqu*

stronghold in those years. When it came to 2001, the situation was really alarming. For example, they even planned to merge the Shanghai *Kunqu* Troupe with the Shanghai Peking Opera Troupe. It seems that *kunqu* had completely lost its commercial value. But the UNESCO designation in the same year (2001) caught the Chinese government's attention. They felt the urge to protect this intangible cultural heritage and a lot of conferences and meetings were held to discuss the preservation of the genre. At that time, I thought that this might bring hope and I guessed the central government would invest money in this cause. Indeed, they did allocate fifty million yuan, but I don't know the specific purposes for which this money has been used. In my view, no considerable achievements have been made. Before our *Peony (Pavilion)*, I didn't see any noticeable stage work produced under the official sponsorship.

**Wei: What was the reason for that?**

Pai: It is, for example, the direction they followed. It's a tremendous task to preserve *kunqu*. It's not as easy as you think. It's not like the protection of bronze artefacts...you build a museum and then put them inside. Instead, this task involves the basics of *kunqu* aesthetics, the entire system of training professional actors. Take the British Royal Ballet for instance, for all these years, they have had their own sponsorship, and their own management system. The Chinese government, as you know, has many things to do and at the moment the major investments still go into road building, house building, and all the infrastructure development. The priority is not yet on cultural development. To be frank, the Ministry of Culture does not have much of a budget. Therefore, the general situation was not all that favourable. But if we don't embark on this task, those *kunqu* masters such as Zhang Jiqing, are getting even older, and will soon be unable to teach any longer. We should get them to pass on their expertise as soon as possible. What I'm doing is preserving *kunqu*, and producing stage works to preserve the art; we train a generation of young actors and we produce something that can be taken as a fairly successful model.

**Wei: So you consider this young-lovers' version of *The Peony Pavilion* as a model?**

Pai: Yes, it is a successful example. During the past five years, we've already performed over a hundred times. What we present is a large-scale, complete production of a *kunqu* classic. Another big contribution of our work is that we are building an audience base that is made up of young people. Most young people, probably 95 per cent, have never watched *kunqu* performances before. Even if they have, they would probably be clips on the internet, or programmes on the TV, for just a couple of selected scenes at best. It's very rare that they will have attended any complete *kunqu* plays in the theatre. They never knew that we have such a beautiful performing art. However, when they saw our work...Wow! Such a burst of enthusiasm...for example, in Beijing, Xi'an, Tianjin, virtually everywhere we go. It's not easy to sit through the nine hours of complete play. This is just amazing. For some of them, even if you offer them free tickets, you can't be sure if they'll show up. So you can imagine how difficult it would be if you ask them to pay for it.

**Wei: But we seem to have made this possible.**

Pai: Exactly. The total number of audiences has reached about 200,000 up to today. It's just amazing that we were received with similar enthusiasm everywhere, be it in Taipei, Hong Kong, Shenzhen, or in Xi'an, Beijing. All audiences showed the same excitement and joy. It (*kunqu*) has something that is trans-regional. The British audiences, as you can see, also like the performance immensely...some of them are from Oxford, the University of London, some are from the cultural circle, and some from the art circle. They've only just realized that China has such an elegant art form.

**Wei: Some audiences, such as those from mainland China, came to the show just out of curiosity rather than a real understanding, is that right?**

Pai: Yes. They'd never watched *kunqu* before, so how could they understand it? In the beginning, it was indeed their curiosity that drew them into the theatre. It's because of me, the so-called 'celebrity effect'. For example, at Peking University and Nankai University, many of the audiences were my readers, and they wondered what this stage work might look like. They may have come to support me for the first day, but if you say that is also the reason that they sat through nine hours for the complete show, I don't think so. It's impossible that they'd spend three nights just to support me. It's just impossible. It's all because of the show itself. It has the power to attract and keep them (interested). As you've seen, once they get into the theatre, they were just mesmerized by the show itself. It's highly challenging to get English audiences to watch such a performance.

**Wei: How would you look at *kunqu* preservation in today's general context of traditional opera crisis?**

Pai: Each operatic genre has its own difficulties. Peking opera is not as popular as before. During the ten-year Cultural Revolution, people had no chance to watch real Peking Opera. This caused a severe audience loss. The audience base needs to be re-established from the ageing of the audiences. *Kunqu* is different from Peking Opera. *Kunqu* still has the opportunity - it features its high aesthetic values, its music, its acting, its librettos...all are very elegant and beautiful. Many stories depicted in *kunqu* plays are about romantic love, life-transcending love. This is a universal subject that can be consumed worldwide. In this respect, Peking Opera has some barriers to being promoted widely on the international stage. The most-seen Peking Opera works are those like "The Monkey King's Havoc in Heaven" (*Sun Wukong da nao tiangong*), and "Divergence" (*San chakou*). Typical martial scenes like these leave Western audiences with the impression that Chinese opera is only capable of presenting such skills as tumbling and summersaults. Also, Peking opera music, where the *huqin*-led orchestration features a piercing quality that western audiences are not particularly accustomed to. In *kunqu*, the music and acting are extremely elegant...the music and dances hold great appeal for audiences...the flickering water sleeves are very beautiful. In Peking opera, they do have stylized acting, but not as exquisite and complicated as that in *kunqu*. As you saw yesterday, in "Interrupted Dream" (*jingmeng*), in the solo performances of the female lead, the dance movements continued through to the end of this half-hour scene...singing was accompanied throughout with dancing and acting - it (*kunqu*) has a very high standard of acting. Another issue for Peking opera is its theme. Many plays in Peking opera repertoire are about loyalty, filial piety, faithfulness and righteousness (*zhong xiao jie yi*)...the leading male singers always have a beard (*laosheng*)...but, themes

of this kind don't hold much appeal for today's young people. For example, one play tells of Wang Baochuan waiting for her husband, Xue Pinggui, for eighteen years. Who would wait for such a long time in modern society? But the love depicted in *The Peony Pavilion* is different – it's a legend; it's immortal.

**Wei: As the general producer of this play, what is the biggest challenge that you confronted during its production?**

Pai: We've met with a lot of difficulties. The main problem is that *kunqu* has a history of six hundred years, and this play has a history of four hundred years. How can you present its high aesthetics on the modern stage? How can you present the best qualities, and make it appeal to modern audiences who have a completely different aesthetic standard? So the basic issue is how to match the ancient elements with the modern elements: how to present this four-hundred-year-old, *Peony*, onto the stage of the twenty-first century, while not letting the modern elements hamper it. We've been very careful with the stage setting, the choreography...we paid attention to every minute element, such as the design of the backdrop, a writing scroll as a stage prop, the matching of colours, and so on. We've been very discreet. In "Declaration of Ambitions" (*yanhuai*) we used four calligraphic scrolls to depict the scholarly temperament of the male protagonist. Chinese calligraphic works are highly artistic, but these scrolls are not just decorative, they are also crucial for depicting the theme of this scene. The colour of these calligraphic works also matches the actor's costumes...it's just perfect. 'Perfection' (*weimei*) is the ultimate aim of our production. The floral gods are another example; their costumes go very well with the background to create a highly colorful environment.

**Wei: In some scenes, such as "Wandering in the Garden" and "Interrupted Dream", you have used colour-lighting.**

Pai: Yes, all lighting is computerized. But we cannot use it too much. Many modern *kunqu* productions use colour-lighting rather randomly, but we've been very careful. At the end of "Departing Soul," a spotlight was shone on the female protagonist with the multi-metre long shawl.

**Wei: It's very impressive.**

Pai: You saw it yesterday. It makes the ending of the scene a very forceful one.

**Wei: Between traditions and innovations, different people might seek different balances. Take the floral gods and the ghost characters in this play for instance. Some critics say that you added too many of them so that you changed the scenes into group dances. What do you think about this?**

Pai: This work is a large-scale production. If it were just a single-scene, we wouldn't have needed to involve so many actors. It's a nine-hour show, so we do need grand scenes at times. Without them, the work would be too thin. If all scenes are solo or duo acts, such as "Interrupted Dream" and "Declaration of Ambitions", the production will be too weak.

**Wei: So some alteration is necessary?**

Pai: Exactly. But if all scenes are filled with many actors, it would become too crowded. Therefore, we have made careful considerations about when it should be a

group act, when a solo and when a duo. We have a group of scholar-advisors to work on the selection and rearrangement of these scenes. What we present today is not the first result of our discussion...we've undergone repeated alterations and revisions.

**Wei: Similar criticism has been leveled at the music. Towards the end of each instalment, you used choral singing of a theme tune. Some conservationists just don't accept this. What is the reason for this design?**

Pai: They (conservationists) call them 'non-*kunqu* elements'. They insist that real *kunqu* works should be with "original sauce and original flavor" (*yuanzhi yuanwei*). But what is *yuanzhi yuanwei*? Are works from Tang Xianzu's time more authentic? Or works from the Qianlong years more authentic? Or works from Republican times more authentic? The fact is that all these works vary greatly. Each historical period has its own performing style; the Ming and Qing stage was illuminated by candles, so are we going to use candles too? And performances at that time were mainly presented in small venues such as residential halls. Today, we need to perform on large stages in the theatre. How can you proceed without any changes? It's impossible. The key point is how to make the changes good ones, with good effect. As you saw yesterday, at the end of "Soul Departed," Du Liniang dies, so it's impossible that she continues to sing as she walks off towards backstage. We need the choral singing to 'see her off'. It's necessary for the development of the plot. If there's just music accompaniment from the orchestra but no singing at this moment, it won't achieve the proper effect.

It's true that we've made some changes in the acting, but all are made to enhance the overall theatricality of the play. In other editions of this scene produced in the past, after she dies, the ghost of Du wears just a red shawl – a very short one – and walks off stage quickly, without any special depiction.

**Wei: So it was rather simple?**

Pai: Yes, but in those days, even this design, the red shawl, was considered extraordinary.

**Wei: Have you noticed any differences between the aesthetic choices of the mainland artists and those from Taiwan during your cooperation with them?**

Pai: Yes, there are differences. The Taiwan side built their links with stage performances from different countries around the world very early on. Each year, many world-renowned artists would perform in Taiwan, especially Taipei. The local stage set workers saw many of these performances and, as a result, they developed a more open, more experimental attitude. But the Taiwan artists involved in our production actually still have a deep understanding of our cultural tradition. They are both traditional and modern. As you have seen, this production has preserved the conventional acting techniques of *kunqu*, yet meanwhile it has a modern flavor. This combination of tradition and modernity is exactly what we want. The mainland artists, on the other hand, are different. Of course, some are really modern, and maybe extremely avant-garde, but their productions are not *kunqu*. It doesn't work. We have a general principle, which you will see in many of my interviews and talks: we need to respect tradition, but not be blindly restrained by it; we use modern techniques, but we don't misuse them. This is really difficult.

Some college students told me that they never watch China Central Television (CCTV) Channel 11, the traditional opera channel, because they don't like it. The programmes are too stereotypical - look at their gaudy and showy costumes. Our costumes, on the other hand, are very simple and elegant.

**Wei: You used different colour systems for different scenes.**

Pai: Yes. For example, in "Soul Departed," the costumes are basically white; whereas in "In Search of Dreams," they are mainly blue – to reveal the protagonist's melancholy.

**Wei: In early *kunqu* history, most troupes were maintained by private owners such as rich merchants. Do you see the possibility that private troupes will be organized under the ownership of some of today's rich entrepreneurs?**

Pai: I'm hoping that one day some big companies will come forward and "adopt" (*renyang*) *kunqu* troupes. Today, some big enterprises have adopted football clubs. They can also adopt troupes, or stage productions - they can use them for their commercial publicity and promotion. This is a very common practice in France and the U.S. where some companies set up special foundations for concerts, etc. This is also the case with the Royal Ballet. Big companies or banks will adopt the art group on an annual basis.

As far as I know, one of the barriers preventing mainland enterprises from doing so is that in their annual budget, there is no such budget for charity funding, or for building public relations.

**Wei: So this is the main difference from the west?**

Pai: Exactly. In the west, they must have a certain percentage of their budget set aside for charity and public benefit undertakings – for charity and non-profit purposes. On the mainland, there hasn't been such a policy for this purpose. Of course, some wealthy bosses may spend money for whatever they are interested in, but no policies have been established. In Taiwan, they already have such policies. For example, Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company Limited (TSMC) has a cultural foundation with which they support a lot of cultural programs each year. The company's board of directors observes a very strict policy on this - it's highly transparent. They hold meetings, and reach agreements on what to support and how to spend the money...and their accounting system...everything is very transparent. On the mainland, they don't have this policy. What they worry about is if they allocate the money, they cannot be guaranteed where the money goes.

**Wei: Prior to your adaptation of this play, there have been another two adaptations of *Peony* that came out in 1999, one by Chen Shizheng, and the other by Peter Sellars. Have you seen these works? What do you think of them?**

Pai: I have seen Chen's work. It's a successful performance that attracted a large number of western audiences. It scored a good box-office victory in New York. It has a very complicated story behind the production. In the previous year (1998), this production started as a collaboration between Chen and the Shanghai Kunqu Troupe. In the end, the Shanghai municipal government did not give permission for their actors' departure for this show for various reasons. Then, Chen Shizheng managed to stage the performance with substitute actors while the Shanghai Kunqu Troupe



produced their own version as well. Because of the dispute - escalating even into the political arena, publicity for Chen's production reached a very large audience, which actually contributed to its success.

I attended a performance of this work. Although it was called a 55-scene complete edition, it was not actually so. What they did was to take a part of each of the 55 scenes to form their production. In the original script, there are altogether over 400 arias. It's virtually impossible to stage all of them – it would take too long to finish it. In Chen's production, only the leading singers were professional *kunqu* singers: Qian Yi, from the Shanghai Kunqu Troupe and Wen Yuhang, from the Northern Kunqu Troupe. All the other singers were from other operatic backgrounds, such as Peking Opera and Sichuan Opera. Therefore, strictly speaking it's not a *kunqu* production; it's a combination of many operatic elements. They also made use of a puppet show and Suzhou ballad singing, their stage sceneries were built using actual objects, there is a pavilion, and a pond with ducks...it made for a pleasant scene, and it was quite jolly, but it was not a *kunqu* production.

**Wei: Did it travel widely?**

Pai: It toured in Singapore, Europe, but not in the U.K.

**Wei: That was about ten years ago. Recently, we have seen several new *kunqu* productions, such as the Royal Granary edition of *Peony* in Beijing. Have you seen it yourself?**

Pai: I know this version. It was directed by our artistic director, Wang Shiyu, but I haven't attended it myself. It's a tourist project. It's packaged with the serving of dinners.

**Wei: It's a very small-scale production and the ticket prices are very high. How would you see the prospect of this mode of production?**

Pai: It is indeed a branch of *kunqu* production, but we can not depend upon this kind of production. It is too expensive for the general public. Not many people can afford.

**Wei: Another production is the version starring the famous Japanese *kabuki* master, Tamasaburo Bando. What would be its significance?**

Pai: Of course its significance is that through this production the Japanese would know more about China's *kunqu*. Bando is the 'Japanese Du Liniang'...but this production is only a small scene of the original play. It is good that artists from all different backgrounds get involved in *kunqu* productions, but the most important thing is to preserve real *kunqu*.

**Wei: Do you have any other plans after this production? Maybe another *kunqu* work?**

Pai: It's very difficult to stage a play. It involves not just time and effort, but also sponsorship. Our *Peony* (production) has relied on the sponsorship of so many people: some from Taiwan and Hong Kong, others from the U.S. Our London tour was made possible only with some Taiwanese support...and the Chinese government – the Chinese Ministry of Culture and local governments – also allocated funds for this tour.

**Wei:** It seems that all the major productions we've seen in the past few years, such as *The Palace of Eternal Youth* by the Shanghai Kunqu Troupe, *1699 The Peach Blossom Fan* directed by Tian Qinxin, and your version of *Peony*, are all large-scale productions. Yet for those smaller troupes, such a production mode is very challenging. What would be a rational road for *kunqu* production in the future?

Pai: We need both large-scale and small-scale productions. We don't have to make every production into two-day or three-day instalments ...we can also make single-night shorter editions. But for *Peony*, a longer edition is better to depict the entire story.

It's very difficult to build an audience base for *kunqu*, but at least we now have some good signs. We now have a lot more audience members than before.

**Wei:** What do you think about the difficulties faced by our young actors?

Pai: There are many difficulties. It takes a long time to learn *kunqu* well, but their pay is very low. Even if you have enthusiasm for the art, if you don't have enough opportunity to perform, your enthusiasm will be dampened too.

**Wei:** Do you find any difference between British audiences' responses to the performance and that of American audiences?

Pai: The British audiences are more conservative – as they always are. But once asked, they would say the same thing. They also think that *kunqu* is beautiful, such as its music, dances, and costumes - they know what is highly artistic. London audiences have seen all sorts of performances, and they have sound judgment.

**Wei:** Do you have any suggestions for future *kunqu* preservation?

Pai: The government should get more involved. They should protect *kunqu* as they protect the antiques in the Forbidden City. They should not count the commercial gains in this cause. I hope they will build a *kunqu* theatre in Suzhou, where *kunqu* performances are available throughout the year. It's just the same as putting cultural artefacts into a museum...it shouldn't be too difficult. We now have more than a thousand theatres all over China, but none of them is a *kunqu* theatre. They've spent a lot of money, but not where it's most needed.

## GLOSSARY

*bai mudan xianxiang* 白牡丹现象  
*Bai Yunsheng* 白云生  
*baihua qifang, tuichen chuxin* 百花齐放，推陈出新  
*bailian jiao qiyi* 白莲教起义  
*baishi* 拜师  
*bangzi* 梆子  
*baohu he zhenxing kunqu yishu shinian*  
*guihua* 保护和振兴昆曲艺术十年规划  
*baohu, jicheng, gexin, fazhan* 保护，继承，革新，发展  
*baoyin* 包银  
*Beijing Suzhou shanghui* 北京苏州商会  
*beikun* 北昆  
*bianzhong* 编钟  
*Cai Ming* 蔡明  
*Cai Shaohua* 蔡少华  
*Cai Zhengren* 蔡正仁  
*caizi jiaren* 才子佳人  
*Cao Yu* 曹禺  
*Changchun gong* 长春宫  
*Changsheng dian* 长生殿  
*Chen Miaochang* 陈妙常  
*Chen Qide* 陈启德  
*chou* 丑  
*chuanqi* 传奇  
*chuantong yu xiandai de ronghe* 传统与现代的融合  
*chunhua* 纯化  
*Chunxiang naoxue* 春香闹学  
*Chunxiang* 春香  
*chunzibei yanyuan* 传字辈演员  
*cishadan* 刺杀旦  
*Cixi* 慈禧  
*Cong Zhaohuan* 丛兆桓  
*da tuanyuan* 大团圆  
*danya* 淡雅  
*dan* 旦  
*Daoguang* 道光  
*dengcai* 灯彩  
*Dingzhi chunqiu* 鼎峙春秋  
*diwang jiangxiang* 帝王将相  
*di* 笛

*Du Liniang* 杜丽娘  
*ducao* 毒草  
*Duihua* 堆花  
*erhuang* 二黄  
*erhu* 二胡  
*Fan Mannong* 樊曼依  
*fan* 幡  
*feichuncui jicheng* 非纯粹继承  
*Fushe* 复社  
*gaixi, gairen, gaizhi* 改戏，改人，改制  
*Gao Huilan* 高蕙兰  
*Gao Lian* 高濂  
*Gao Zhanxiang* 高占祥  
*gaohu* 高胡  
*gelü pu* 歌律谱  
*geming yangbanxi* 革命样板戏  
*gewu* 歌舞  
*gezaixi* 歌仔戏  
*gongche pu* 工尺谱  
*gongfeng neiren* 供奉内人  
*Gu Duhuang* 顾笃璜  
*Gu Weiying* 顾卫英  
*Guangxu* 光绪  
*Guanyu baohu he zhenxing kunju de tongzhi*  
 关于保护和振兴昆剧的通知  
*Guanyu dali fanrong chuanguo de tongzhi*  
 关于大力繁荣创作的通知  
*Guanyu dui kunju yishu caiqu teshu baohu zhengce de tongzhi*  
 关于对昆剧艺术采取特殊保护政策的通知  
*gudian wei ti, xiandai wei yong* 古典为体，现代为用  
*guimendan* 闺门旦  
*Guojia kunqu yishu qiangjiu, baohu he fuchi gongcheng shishi fang'an*  
 国家昆曲艺术抢救，保护和扶持工程实施方案  
*guoju yundong* 国剧运动  
*guoju* 国剧  
*guqin* 古琴  
*guzheng* 古筝  
*haipai* 海派  
*Hakaxi* 客家戏  
*Han Shichang* 韩世昌  
*hangdang* 行当  
*He Xilai* 何西来  
*He Yuren* 何玉人  
*he* 合  
*Hong Bingwen* 洪炳文

Hong Sheng 洪昇  
 Hong Weizhu 洪惟助  
 Hongmei ji 红梅记  
 Hou Fangyu 侯方域  
 Hu Shi 胡适  
 Hu Yaobang 胡耀邦  
 Hua Wei 华玮  
 Hua Wenyi 华文漪  
 huabu 花部  
 huadan 花旦  
 huaju 话剧  
 Huang Yuan 黄源  
 Huang Zuolin 黄佐临  
 huangjia liangcang ban 皇家粮仓版  
 Ji Zhenhua 计镇华  
 Jia Sidao 贾似道  
 Jiang Fucong 蒋复骁  
 Jiao Chengyun 焦承允  
 Jiaqing 嘉庆  
 Jiatongban 家童班  
 Jifang ban 集芳班  
 jingju 京剧  
 jingpai 京派  
 jing 净  
 Jiuchao hui 九朝会  
 Jiuxiao huanpei 九霄环佩  
 Juben 剧本  
 jue'r 角儿  
 kandian 看点  
 Kang Sheng 康生  
 Kangxi 康熙  
 kechuan 客串  
 kuaxi 垮戏  
 kundiao 昆调  
 kunju 昆剧  
 kunqiang 昆腔  
 Kunqu chuancheng jihua 昆曲传承计划  
 Kunqu chuanxi jihua 昆曲传习计划  
 kunqu dang 昆曲党  
 kunqu xin meixue 昆曲新美学  
 Kunqu yu chuantong wenhua yanjiu congshu  
 昆曲与传统文化研究丛书  
 kunqu 昆曲  
 kunshan qiang 昆山腔  
 Li Huiniang 李慧娘  
 Li Longji 李隆基  
 Li Xiangjun 李香君  
 Li Xiangting 李祥霆  
 Liang Chenyu 梁辰鱼  
 Liang Qichao 梁启超  
 liangtiaotui zoulu 两条腿走路  
 liangxiang 亮相  
 Lianhe zaobao 联合早报  
 Liaozhai zhiyi 聊斋志异  
 Lin Kehua 林克华  
 Lin Weilin 林为林  
 Lin Zhaohua 林兆华  
 liudong de bowuguan 流动的博物馆  
 li 理  
 longtao 龙套  
 Lou Yulie 楼宇烈  
 Lu Eting 陆萼庭  
 Lu Shengbo 卢声伯  
 luntan 乱弹  
 Lun xiaoshuo yu qunzhi zhi guanxi 论小说与  
 群治之关系  
 Mao Zedong 毛泽东  
 Mei Lanfang 梅兰芳  
 Meng Chao 孟超  
 Mengzhong qing 梦中情  
 minji 民籍  
 Mo Xiaomi 莫小米  
 mo 末  
 Mu Ouchu 穆藕初  
 Mudan ting 牡丹亭  
 mudan yan 牡丹宴  
 Mudan yibai 牡丹一百  
 Mulian 目连  
 Nanfu 南府  
 nankun 南昆  
 nanxi 南戏  
 ning chuanpo, bu chuancuo 宁穿破，不穿错  
 niexi 捏戏  
 niyueban 女乐班  
 Pai Hsien-yung 白先勇  
 Pan Bizheng 潘必正  
 Pei Yu 裴禹  
 piaoyou 票友  
 pihuang 皮黄  
 pipa 琵琶  
 Qi Rushan 齐如山  
 qiangjiu, jicheng, gexin, fazhan 抢救，继  
 承，革新，发展  
 Qianjia chuantong 乾嘉传统  
 Qianlong 乾隆  
 Qinqishuhua shiji hua 琴棋书画诗酒花  
 qingchang 清唱

qingchun ban kunqu xianxiang 青春版昆曲现象  
qingchun ban 青春版  
qingchun meng 青春梦  
qing 情  
qinqiang 秦腔  
quanben 全本  
Quanfu ban 全福班  
Quanshan jinke 劝善金科  
quanxi 全戏  
qugao hegua 曲高和寡  
quhui 曲会  
quju 曲聚  
qupai 曲牌  
qushe 曲社  
quyou 曲友  
Rengui qing 人鬼情  
Renjian qing 人间情  
renminxing 人民性  
Rongqing she 荣庆社  
roumei 柔美  
Sanya yuan 三雅园  
sanzhe bingju 三者并举  
Seiko Nagaoka 长冈成贡  
Shangyin qushe 赏音曲社  
Shantaohong 山桃红  
Shen Fengying 沈丰英  
Shen Yanbing 沈雁冰  
Shen Yili 沈昀丽  
Shenbao 申报  
Shengping shu 升平署  
sheng 生  
sheng 笙  
Shi jing 诗经  
shichanghua 市场化  
Shiwu guan 十五贯  
shuimo diao 水磨调  
Sifan 思凡  
Sohn Jin-chaek 孙振策  
suqi 俗气  
Suzhou kunju chuanxi suo 苏州昆剧传习所  
su 俗  
Tang Xianzu 汤显祖  
Tao Xiquan 陶希泉  
Taohua shan 桃花扇  
Tian Han 田汉  
Tian Qinxin 田沁鑫  
Tianguan cifu li 天官赐福礼  
tianli jiao 天理教

tiedan 贴旦  
tingtang ban 厅堂版  
tiqin 提琴  
Tongzhi 同治  
Wang Ankui 王安葵  
Wang Shiwei 汪史薇  
Wang Shiyu 汪世瑜  
Wang Tong 王童  
Wang Xiang 王翔  
Wanli 万历  
Wei Liangfu 魏良辅  
Wen Jiabao 温家宝  
wenchang 文场  
Weng Guosheng 翁国生  
Wenhuibao 文汇报  
wenming xi 文明戏  
Wenxue jinhua guannian yu xiju gailiang 文学进化观念与戏剧改良  
wenya 文雅  
Wu Mei 吴梅  
Wu Sujun 吴素君  
Wu Xinlei 吴新雷  
wuchang 武场  
wusheng 武生  
Xi yuefu 新乐府  
Xia Huanxin 夏焕新  
Xiandai wenxue 现代文学  
Xianfeng 咸丰  
Xianni she 仙霓社  
xiansuo 弦索  
Xiao Jinhua 小金虎  
Xiao lanhua ban 小兰花班  
Xiao Lihe 肖丽河  
xiao 箫  
xiaoyuan ban 校园版  
xiju 戏剧  
xinban 新版  
Xin qingnian 新青年  
Xin Yiyun 辛意云  
xipi 西皮  
xiqu gaige 戏曲改革  
xiqu 戏曲  
Xu Fuming 徐扶明  
Xu Yanzhi 徐炎之  
Xueshou ji 血手记  
xun 埙  
yabu 雅部  
Yan Huiyu 严惠宇  
Yang Yuhuan 杨玉环

*Yanzhi* 胭脂  
*Yao Hua* 姚华  
*ya* 雅  
*Ye Jintian* 叶锦添  
*yingmi* 影迷  
*yiqiang* 弋腔  
*Yongzheng* 雍正  
*Yougui wuhai lun* 有鬼无害论  
*youqing ren* 有情人  
*Yoyuan jingmeng* 游园惊梦  
*Yu Guangzhong* 余光中  
*Yu Jiulin* 俞玖林  
*Yu Pingbo* 俞平伯  
*Yu Qiuyu* 余秋雨  
*Yu Zhenfei* 俞振飞  
*yuanlin ban* 园林版  
*yuanzhi yuanwei* 原汁原味  
*yuan* 圆  
*Yue Meiti* 岳美缙  
*yuju* 豫剧  
*Yunmen wuji* 云门舞集  
*Yuzan ji* 玉簪记  
*zaju* 杂剧  
*Zaoluopao* 皂罗袍  
*zaozhouzi* 早轴子  
*Zeng Yongyi* 曾永义  
*Zhang Geng* 张庚

*Zhang Jiqing* 张继青  
*Zhang Shanxiang* 张善芴  
*Zhang Shuxiang* 张淑香  
*Zhang Weidong* 张卫东  
*Zhang Yetang* 张野塘  
*Zheng Peikai* 郑培凯  
*Zheng Yinbai* 郑因百  
*zhengdan* 正旦  
*zhengsheng* 正声  
*zhengzong, zhengtong, zhengpai* 正宗，正  
 统，正派  
*Zhenxing kunju zhidao weiyuanhui* 振兴昆剧  
 指导委员会  
*zhezi xi* 折子戏  
*zhiqing* 至情  
*Zhong Rongming* 张荣明  
*Zhongguo feiwuzhi wenhua yichan baohu*  
*zhongxin* 中国非物质文化遗产保护中心  
*Zhongguo guojia huajuyuan* 中国国家话剧院  
*Zhou Enlai* 周恩来  
*Zhou Qin* 周秦  
*Zhou Youliang* 周友良  
*Zhu Rongji* 朱镕基  
*Zhuibaiqiu* 缀白裘  
*ziwo fasheng qi* 自我发声期

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